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The Role Grade-Level Configuration Plays on Meeting Young Adolescents' Developmental Needs

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Abstract

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This dissertation is a mixed-methods research study on the role grade-level configuration plays on meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents. This study reviews the history of the middle school, explains the controversy over grade span configurations, and articulates the developmental needs of young adolescents and what schools should provide to ensure the success of their students.

Seven schools in northwest North Carolina were examined. Four of these schools serve students in a 6-8 setting and three serve students in a K-8 setting. In an attempt to ascertain what grade-level configuration best meets the developmental needs of young adolescents, surveys were distributed to the seven schools' administration, teachers, and students. The surveys provided questions regarding programs offered, the structure of the school, and other opportunities that were available to the students that would meet their developmental (social/emotional, cognitive, and physical) needs. In addition, the researcher conducted focus groups at all seven schools to gather perceptual data that would further justify the findings from the surveys.

The data showed the K-8 schools were able to offer more opportunities to meet the students' social/emotional and cognitive needs. A relationship was discovered that the K-8 schools also had more positive perceptions from their students. There was no relationship found for which grade-level configuration was better able to meet the students' physical needs. Additionally, no relationship was found in meeting developmental needs and higher academic achievement.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In thinking back to my days as a middle school student, what I remember most is how it felt to be in middle school. I remember running for student council, Valentine's Dances, who my friends were, worrying about my clothes, and being self-conscious about . . . well, everything. What I don't remember is what I learned in class, what my grades were, and, unfortunately, who most of my teachers were. Why is this? The development of a young adolescent places an inordinate emphasis on the social side of growing up rather than the academic aspects that most adults are worried about. So why is it that every time the debate arises over the grade configuration in which young adolescents should be taught, the studies always include their academic performance but rarely test whether the environment is conducive to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents?

The National Middle School Association (NMSA, 2003) stated, "For middle schools to be successful, their students must be successful; for students to be successful, the school's organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of young adolescents" (p.1).

Background of the Problem

The debate over what grade configuration young adolescents should be in has been controversial for many years and for various reasons. As a society, we have debated between placing middle school students in K-8 elementary schools, 6-8 middle schools, 7-9 junior high schools, or even all-inclusive K-12 schools.

In the history of education, schools have evolved as society has changed. We have gone from a one-room schoolhouse, to an elementary and high school combination, to adding a junior high in the middle, to finally evolving the junior high into a middle

school. Each of these grade configurations were intended to meet our needs as a society, though not all of them met the young adolescents' needs developmentally. For example, when determining what configuration to utilize, Anfara and Buehler (2005) stated, "Beyond what is best for students, administrative issues related to transportation, finances, and facilities usage all affect the final decision" (p. 53). As a result, students advancing through the K-12 educational system are finding that schooling often becomes increasingly impersonal and developmentally unresponsive (Felner et al., 2001).

When referring to young adolescents' developmental needs, Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) noted that these students have a need for "social support, personal relationships, relatedness, community, and autonomy" (p. 171). These aspects are essential for the reason that these "young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes between the ages of 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives" (NMSA, 2003, p. 3).

One of the best sources for understanding young adolescents' developmental needs is the NMSA. According to NMSA (2005), this organization was established in 1973, contains approximately 30,000 members, and works with issues specific to the developmental needs of young adolescents. This highly regarded organization distributed a Position Paper entitled *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2003). The following is a summation of their views in regard to young adolescents' developmental needs.

NMSA (2003) explained young adolescents' developmental needs by stating, "It is vitally important to recognize that the areas of development – intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral – are inexorably intertwined" (p. 3). NMSA explained further by stating,

Young adolescents reveal growing capacity for thinking about how they learn, for

> considering multiple ideas, and for planning steps to carry out their own learning . . . most middle level students require ongoing, concrete, experiential learning in order to develop intellectually. (p. 3)

Not only are young adolescents' cognitive needs unique, the NMSA (2003) stated that "Rapid physical changes combined with the multiple hazards of contemporary life make early adolescence a crucial period for developing healthy personal habits" (p. 4). Among other important developmental traits, the NMSA elaborated, "Remember that young adolescents hunger for positive relationships with caring adults and opportunities for informal interactions and conversations with them" (p. 4). Looking at all this information combined, young adolescents' developmental needs are truly unique with their cognitive abilities, physical changes, and social desires to be accepted and cared for. In concluding, some of the most important information regarding young adolescents' developmental needs, NMSA stated,

> Several developmental processes associated with adolescence, while natural and necessary, present challenges to those entrusted with the responsibility for the healthy development and education of young adolescents, and it is very clear that the schools of yesterday are ill-suited for meeting the challenges of today. (p. 5)

In reference to the challenges of today, young adolescents are attempting to be successful within a society that currently has a divorce rate of 3.4 for every 1,000 in the population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). With today's marriage rate at 6.8 per 1,000 in population, this means that essentially 50% of marriages are ending in divorce. In reference to the crime rate, the FBI released 2013 statistics reporting, "There were an estimated 1,163,146 violent crimes reported to law enforcement last year, along with an estimated 8,632,512 property crimes" (FBI, 2013,

p.1). Given the fact that society is not conducive to nurturing our young adolescents, it becomes imperative that our educational institutions do. If one grade configuration is conducive to meeting the needs of young adolescents so that they can become successful, productive members of our society, it is vital that we discover which one and provide that information to the public. In theory, producing more successful students could improve our current culture as they will enter society well-adjusted, educated, and ready to make a difference.

There have been many academic advances within education over the years. Whether they were inspired by the Committee of Ten, Sputnik, Japanese innovations, or No Child Left Behind, American schooling has been influenced to change its focus. This focus has been scholarly and competitive to ensure that American students can compete globally. However, with all of the focus on curriculum and pushing students further, have we forgotten to meet the developmental needs of our students? While some might think that these two components are unrelated, NMSA (2003) reminded us that "With young adolescents, achieving academic success is highly dependent upon their other developmental needs also being met" (p. 3).

Statement of the Problem

The problem we continue to face with young adolescent placement in schools is that while we have been debating which grade configuration is more effective for academics, we have overlooked which grade configuration is more effective for their development. Weiss and Kipnes (2006) stated, "For the most part, research on student outcomes and performance in the middle grades focuses on the academic performance of adolescents" (p. 8). It should also be noted that "the research comparing K-8 and middle school configurations includes important caveats," (Beane & Lipka, 2006, p. 28)

resulting in many inconclusive reports in regards to the optimal placement for young adolescents.

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that with our recent academic advances, we have been neglecting the school environment and what our students need developmentally to be successful. Through multiple studies, we have become aware that "School environments that are larger, increasingly complex, and teacher-centered may not be responsive to adolescents' developmental needs (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Regardless of grade span, the environment of the school needs to be developmentally responsive. Anfara and Buehler (2005) added to this theory by denoting that there is "Evidence that academic achievement, social development, and dropout rates are all influenced by grade span configuration" (p. 56). Yet, according to Hough (1995) there is no national consensus on appropriate spans for the middle grades (p. 8). Weiss and Kipnes (2006) thought this was because "Most districts have only one configuration of schooling forms (e.g., elementary school for grades K-5, middle school for grades 6-8, and high school for grades 9-12), [so] comparisons are problematic, since it can be difficult to disentangle district-level differences from school-level differences" (p. 3). Obviously, not having enough research to delineate the appropriate grade span for young adolescents' developmental needs is problematic when research has unveiled that the configuration of grades can lead to significant differences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine which grade configuration (K-8/6-8) is most beneficial to young adolescents' developmental needs. Developmental needs, as defined in this study, include their social/emotional, physical, and cognitive needs. In essence, this study sought to conclude which grade-level configuration best meets young

adolescents' social and emotional needs; which grade-level configuration best meets young adolescents' physical needs; and which grade-level configuration best meets young adolescents' cognitive needs. This research will help educational leaders consider another significant component when determining what grade span is most appropriate for middle school age children.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies within discovering what grade-level configuration is most appropriate for young adolescents' developmental needs and conveying that information to administrators who can then adjust their settings as necessary. Eccles and Roeser (2011) emphatically stated that students excel in settings that fit within their developmental, cultural, and psychological needs. Eccles et al. (1993) also found that much of the decline in school-related motivation and engagement reflects developmentally inappropriate changes in the nature of schooling as students move from primary school into secondary school. These results pertaining to the social/emotional well-being of students were significant in relation to the organizational structure of the school (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991).

According to the Digest of Education Statistics released in 2012, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012) found that overall, public school enrollment has risen 26% from 39.4 million to 49.8 million in the years 1985 to 2012. Projections for enrollment are expected to exceed 58.4 million by 2021, setting all time high records each year. The implication of this increase in enrollment means that now is the time to look at our education system to ensure that we are doing everything we can to grow productive, successful members of society. If the grade configuration in which we are educating our students impacts their success, then more research needs to be

conducted in this area.

Primary Research Questions

1. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the social/emotional needs of young adolescents?
2. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the physical needs of young adolescents?
3. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the cognitive needs of young adolescents?
4. What is the relationship between the constructs of developmental needs (social/emotional, physical, cognitive) and academic achievement?

Research Design

The research began with a survey distributed to the administrators and teachers which is being used with permission from Dr. Ken McEwin and is entitled National Middle School Survey. This survey was utilized by Dr. Ken McEwin and Dr. Melanie Greene in 2009. By breaking down the survey into two parts, one for administrators and one for teachers, the researcher significantly reduced the length of the survey that each participant was responsible for in addition to eliminating questions that were not significant to the social/emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of young adolescents.

This study first surveyed middle grades administrators on various aspects of their schools and gathered logistical information. This survey included information regarding their free/reduced lunch status, current test scores, enrollment numbers, and other various logistical information regarding opportunities that are afforded to the students. The survey was sectioned by headings. The "Curriculum and Instruction" as well as the "Grouping, Team Organization, and Scheduling" sections allowed the researcher to

ascertain what opportunities are being afforded that meet the cognitive developmental needs of young adolescents. The "Sports and Advisory" portion allowed the researcher to gather relevant information on how the schools are meeting the physical needs of young adolescents. Gathering this information allowed for further dissection on why one grade-level configuration may be more successful than the others.

Next, the teachers received a survey. This survey, entitled "Teacher Disposition Survey," is designed to measure the teachers' perceptions of the level of importance as well as the degree of implementation of various middle school components within their current grade-level configuration. The questions regarding advisory programs, a supportive environment, and family/community partnerships yielded answers to how the schools are meeting the social/emotional needs of young adolescents. The questions regarding interdisciplinary teaming, flexible schedules and grouping, multiple learning approaches, and rigorous curriculum gave the researcher significant information on how the schools are meeting the cognitive needs of young adolescents. Last, the questions regarding health and wellness provided the researcher information on how the schools are meeting the physical needs of this unique age group.

Seven schools were utilized in this study. Three of these schools serve students in Grades PK-8 and four serve students in Grades 6-8. This county was chosen because it is the only county in northwest North Carolina that offers multiple grade-level configurations for their young adolescents.

In addition to surveying the teachers, this study also gathered perceptual data from the students. This was done through utilizing the Perceived School Experiences Scale (PSES) that was developed by Dawn Anderson-Butcher and her colleagues at the University of Ohio (Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, Iachini, & Ball, 2012). This survey

showed the perception students have of their respective schools.

After all the data were collected, they were analyzed for a relationship to discover if specific opportunities offered to young adolescents that met their social/emotional, physical, and cognitive needs aligned with positive student perceptions. In theory, one grade configuration will be more likely to accommodate these young adolescents, as shown through a positive relationship with opportunities and student perceptions. After a relationship was established with a specific grade configuration being more conducive to young adolescents' developmental needs, the researcher then compared the achievement data that were collected in the administrator survey. In doing this, an additional component was assessed to see if meeting developmental needs leads to higher academic achievement.

Last, the researcher conducted focus groups at each of the seven schools. These groups were comprised of multiple teachers through the school who had an array of experience with young adolescents. The same list of questions was used at each of the schools. The researcher then looked for trends in the data and compared them with the quantitative data collected through the surveys.

Theoretical Framework

Through the course of the debate over which grade configuration is most appropriate, two theoretical frameworks have been consistently used. The first is the theory that the grade configuration of the school has a significant impact on the instructional environment, which determines whether the environment is conducive to learning and therefore allowing students to succeed. The second theory is that the developmental needs of young adolescents need to be considered when determining the organizational structure of the school. These theories are explained in greater detail

below.

A look at history can help to further explain the first theory. In the early stages of the grade span configuration debate, the organizational structures of junior high and middle schools were identified as being optimal for producing the best instructional environment for adolescents (Epstein & MacIver, 1990; Hough, 2005). However, several years later when the junior highs and middle schools were being criticized, theorists began to think that the K-8 school structure provided a more appropriate setting for young adolescents (Hough, 2005). A number of researchers compared instructional practices between middle and K-8 schools and observed that strategies such as team teaching, professional learning communities, and mixed-level classrooms were more commonly present in the K-8 school setting than in the middle school setting (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Hough, 2005; Connolly, Yakimowski-Srebnick, & Russo, 2002). These research findings support the idea that the structure of the school can have a significant impact on the opportunities offered and therefore determine student success.

The second theory that is applied throughout this research is that young adolescents have developmental needs that need to be met in order to be successful. The Association of Middle Level Education reminded us that

> Educators who were influential in the development of the middle school (e.g., John Lounsbury, Donald Eichhorn, William Alexander, and Gordon Vars) were insistent that the developmental needs of young adolescents influence the educational environment and organizational structure of the middle school. This desire to be 'developmentally appropriate' was what set the middle school apart from its predecessor, the junior high. (Caskey & Anfara, 2007, p. 3)

Hall (1904) identified preadolescence as a unique growth stage and brought

attention to the fact that their preadolescents' were just as unique as their development. "Decades later, the work of other notable psychologists and theorists (Flavell, 1963; Havighurst, 1968; Piaget, 1952, 1960) advanced the credibility of early adolescence and other developmental stages" (Caskey & Anfara, 2007, p. 2). The Association of Middle Level Education reminds us that Donald Eichhorn, a founding father of the middle school movement, asked educators to take into consideration young adolescents' developmental characteristics and needs when planning curriculum, instruction, and assessment and when structuring the environment of the middle school (Caskey & Anfara, 2007). In an effort to define these developmental characteristics, Caskey and Anfara (2007) explained that

> Recognizing and understanding the unique developmental characteristics (traits associated with human growth) of early adolescence and their relationship to the educational program (i.e., curriculum, instruction, and assessment) and to the structure of the middle school (e.g., flexible block scheduling, advisory programs, and team teaching) are central tenets of middle grades education. (p. 3)

In an effort to showcase the unique developmental characteristics of the young adolescents Caskey and Anfara (2007) referred to, they have been placed in the following table. The underlying belief is that being aware of these characteristics and taking them into consideration when planning the organizational structure of a school and learning experiences will help to ensure the success of young adolescents.

Table 1

Attributes of Young Adolescents

Developmental Characteristic	Attributes of young adolescents (Caskey & Anfara, 2007)
Physical	- More development than at any other time (other than birth-2) - Accelerated and uneven - Coordination issues due to bones growing faster than muscles - Girls experience growth spurts before boys - Significant brain growth
Cognitive/ Intellectual	- Wide range of individual intellectual ability - Curious - Favor active over passive learning experiences - Prefer interaction with peers during learning experiences - Build upon prior experience
Emotional	- Searching for adult identity while seeking peer approval - Self-conscious - Highly sensitive to criticism - Prone to lack of self esteem - Can be moody, restless, and have inconsistent behavior
Social	- Fierce loyalty to peer groups - Test the limits of acceptable behavior - Socially vulnerable

In summation, this study is based on the above two theories. The first is that the grade configuration of a school affects student learning. The second theory concerns knowing and meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents in order to provide them with an opportunity to be successful.

Assumptions

The first prominent assumption in this study was that the various schools would show differences in reference to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents.

The researcher was assuming that these differences could be attributed to the differing grade-level configurations. In the past, the debate over grade-level configurations has shown that the structure of the school led to significant differences in how the school was organized and thus affected young adolescents.

Another prevalent assumption in this study was in regards to the participants. It had to be assumed that the participants read and understood accurately the surveys given to the schools. The researcher assured that the surveys used clear and direct language with hopes that the participants would comprehend the questions and be able to answer them without confusion.

In addition, this study assumed the statements made by the administrators, middle school children, and teachers participating in the study were accurate to their current situation. Anonymity and confidentiality were being ensured so the participants would feel comfortable in answering honestly.

Limitations and Delimitations

In assessing the scope of this study, there were a few limitations that should be considered. First, this study was limited by the completion rate of the surveys. The researcher could not control how many teachers and students completed the surveys; therefore this research was limited to the responses completed.

A second limitation was the potential bias against middle schools as they have been labeled "the wasteland of our primary and secondary landscape" (Tucker & Codding, 1998, p. 153). This mindset would limit this study if the perceptions of the people completing the surveys were distorted by this bias.

A significant delimitation of this survey was the research population. While including more regions may have reflected more accurately the true situation of young

adolescents' schooling, the researcher chose to limit the research population to one county in Northwest North Carolina.

Another delimitation was the timeframe in which this research was completed. This study was conducted in a relatively short timeframe of only one semester. In a longer, more longitudinal study, the results may have been more reflective of the true nature of the schools. As it is presently, the research was limited by only having participants complete the surveys that were currently employed in the spring of 2015.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are defined by the researcher to clarify their usage in this research study and provide clarity of their meanings in this context.

AIG. Refers to the Academically and Intellectually Gifted and is utilized in this paper to describe higher achieving students.

AMLE. An organization called the Association for Middle Level Education, but formerly referred to as the National Middle School Association. Now has approximately 30,000 members and is still dedicated to middle grades education.

Developmental needs. For the purpose of this study, developmental needs refers to the students social/emotional, physical, and cognitive needs.

EC. Refers to Exceptional Children and is used to define students that have been identified as having special learning needs.

Elemiddle. A school that meets the needs of young adolescents in any combination of Grades 5 through 8, but is also part of an organizational structure that includes lower grades.

EOG. End-of-Grade Assessment in which all students in Grades 3-8 are asked to take Math and Reading Assessments.

HSMS. HSMS is how Highly Successful Middle Schools are referred to. They have been recognized as "Schools to Watch" or NASSP Breakthrough Middle Schools based on the students' achievement levels. This term is used specifically with McEwin and Greene's (2011) National Middle School Survey results.

NASSP. Stands for the National Association of Secondary School Principals. This organization has been instrumental in creating publications delineating components of the middle school concept.

NCEE. The National Commission on Excellence in Education. This group produced the infamous "A Nation at Risk" report in 1983 that led to educational reform.

NCLB. Refers to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This Federal Act supports standard-based reforms where all children are assessed annually in hopes of raising individual achievement levels.

NMSA. The acronym for the National Middle School Association. This association is now referred to as AMLE and is dedicated to ensuring the best educational opportunities for middle level children.

PSES. An acronym for the Perceived School Experiences Scale. This survey was created by Dr. Anderson-Butcher at Ohio State and was considered valid and reliable for assessing students' perceptions of their school experiences.

Young adolescents. Refers to children ages 10-15 or typically Grades 6-8.

Summary

This chapter introduced the idea that young adolescents should be in an environment that meets their developmental needs in regards to their unique social/emotional, cognitive, and physical characteristics. Historically, education has adopted several different grade configurations in an effort to meet societal needs and to

increase student achievement. However, it has been suggested that what was developmentally appropriate for young adolescents has been neglected. This chapter also introduced the methodology (surveys from administrators, teachers, and students) utilized to gather information from schools in northwest North Carolina about their ability to meet the developmental needs of the young adolescents within their schools. This chapter discussed the two theoretical frameworks behind this study: that the grade configuration of the school affects student learning and that the developmental needs of young adolescents are unique and need to be met for students to be successful. Last, the chapter briefly discussed the assumptions and limitations/delimitations behind this study and definitions of terms that may help in comprehending the educational jargon utilized within this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction/Restatement of the Problem

Over the past 9 decades, schools for educating children in the middle grades have seen numerous revisions and alterations conducted in an effort to create an educational environment that is suited to the particular academic, social, and emotional needs of students in an often difficult time of life (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Within these revisions, George (2009) reminded us that "Many school district and state level decision makers seem to have been motivated to consider new grade configurations for K-12 schools because of factors unrelated to providing the best education for young adolescents" (p. 4). Recently, the debate over what grade configuration best suits young adolescents has focused on academic performance and results on high stakes testing. The developmental needs of adolescents have been overlooked when determining what types of schools best meet the needs of this student population. This research study is an attempt to review the history of what grade-level configurations young adolescents have been taught in, identify their unique developmental needs, and determine what grade configuration will best meet young adolescents' developmental needs. In doing this, the school districts that are currently restructuring will know how to best meet the needs of this age group.

Theoretical and Empirical Literature

History of the middle school and grade span controversy. The history of grade span configurations regarding young adolescents has been referred to as "the longest-running debate in middle level educational research" (MacIver & Epstein, 1993, p. 520).

At the beginning of public education in the United States, rural schools were primarily one-room structures containing all grade levels, whereas urban schools tended to divide students into primary (Grades 1-8) and secondary (Grades 9-12) schools

(Schafer, 2011).

One of the first calls to restructure public education's two-tier system came in the late 1800s. Harvard University president Charles Eliot and his peers on the National Education Association's Committee of Ten on Secondary Schools Studies argued that the later years of primary schools could be better utilized by introducing college preparatory courses to students (Report of the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies, 2010). There were also other factors that influenced a restructuring of our education system: "The drop-out problem, the dawning recognition of individual differences, changing societal needs; and the desire to implement innovative educational reforms" are just a few noted by McEwin (1983, p. 119). This educational movement changed schooling as we knew it as "the four curricula the report recommended were subject-centered, not society-centered" (Marsh & Willis, 2007, p. 39). Hall (1904), a prominent psychologist during this period, argued that when students reached puberty, distinct developmental needs arose and had to be addressed (p. 509).

The junior high school. To meet all of these needs, at the turn of the 20th century, a junior high school was introduced. This new three-tier model moved upper grade students out of the primary school and into junior high schools (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2008). The transition happened quickly and junior highs were built all throughout our nation. McEwin (1983) stated that we were so quick to accept this new idea due to the expansion of the West, urbanization, industrialization, and the growing demand to prepare students for a secondary education. From 1920 to 1940, junior highs increased from 400 to more than 2,000. This number exponentially increased again, exceeding 6,000 by 1964 (McEwin, 1983, p. 120).

Almost immediately, there was controversy with this transition in education.

Herman (2004) described the junior high school that was most prominent during the 1950s and 1960s as a "mini-high school" (p. 11). Cuban (1992) clarified by arguing that the junior high schools too closely mirrored the high schools in "curriculum, instruction, organization, teacher attitudes toward subject matter, and extracurricular activities" (p. 242), offering little or no consideration to the distinct developmental issues related to pubescent teens. Juvonen (2004) suggested that the junior high model fails to meet young adolescents' needs because it focuses on "content rather than exploration" and "departmentalization rather than integration" among other reasons (p. 14). McEwin and Greene (2011) added that

> Although a major goal of junior high schools was to provide programs uniquely designed to meet the needs of young adolescents, a comprehensive specialized middle level knowledge base needed to fully sustain this goal was largely absent. As a result, most junior high schools patterned themselves after the senior high school model by adopting practices such as a strong emphasis on subject matter specialization, departmentalization, and extensive extra-curricular programs and activities. (p. 6)

So it was not surprising that starting in 1920 and continuing for the next 40 years, substantial discontentment with the junior high school grew (Cuban, 1992; Schafer, 2011; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). "The decline of the junior high school was also undoubtedly influenced by factors growing out of the times . . . the need for reorganization to introduce desegregation earlier" (McEwin, 1983, p. 120). McEwin (1983) added to this reasoning by stating,

> The early planners of junior high schools in their newfound enthusiasm promised far more than could be accomplished in so short a time. The failure to achieve

> these goals was due in part to a lack of knowledge about early adolescents and their educational and developmental needs; to the post Sputnik pressures on Secondary education, including ninth grade, which produced almost intolerable scheduling and academic requirements in junior highs; and to the lack of personnel trained for and committed to working at the middle level. (p. 120)

The junior high schools that had spread rapidly across the United States did not fit the increasingly popular view that young teens had unique social, psychological, intellectual, and emotional needs that required a different kind of education than that provided by either elementary or high schools (Schafer, 2011).

The middle school. Due to the growing discontentment of junior high schools, middle schools were replacing them in the 1960s and 1970s. Much like the junior high movement, the middle school movement was widely accepted and experienced rapid growth (McEwin, 1983). They became the dominant intermediate structure by the 1990s (Mizell, 2005). The idea was to keep the positive concepts from the junior high movement and revamp the areas that had been previously overlooked. For example, the new middle school movement ensured programs based on the needs of 10 to 14 year olds and developing transitional programs that promote continuity (Alexander, 1964). Alexander and Williams (1965) also called for organizational structures that would create schools-within-schools to foster social ties between teachers and students while utilizing the strengths of teachers with different specialties. These changes would hopefully fill the developmental gap that the junior highs unintentionally left.

While many of the reasons behind the emergence of the middle school were partially intended to benefit students, it should also be noted that some of these middle schools were established to eliminate crowding in other schools (McEwin, 1983).

Particularly, the primary reason for inclusion of the sixth grade into the new middle school model seems to have been based more in organizational and structural limitations rather than taking the needs of adolescent students into consideration. Beane and Lipka (2006) reminds us that "as baby boomers poured into elementary schools, school districts found that moving the 5th and/or 6th grades to a 'middle school' was more cost-efficient than building extra elementary schools" (p. 28). Beane and Lipka also mentioned that the new configuration was intended to help integrate the previously segregated neighborhood schools. This is just one more example of how our educational system made decisions based on finances without taking into consideration the developmental needs of young adolescents.

Beginning in the 1980s, researchers began examining the effectiveness of middle schools in response to criticisms that the schools were not meeting the needs of adolescent students. Middle schools were described as "the wasteland of our primary and secondary landscape" (Tucker & Codding, 1998, p. 153). This time period also aligns with the push towards "accountability." Marsh and Willis (2007) noted that "In the 1980s . . . at least 700 national reports on the state of American education were issued by various governmental agencies and private organizations. Most were highly critical of American schools" (pp. 56-57). This led to the release of *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* in April 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). According to this document, "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people . . . others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5). Although the NCEE offered "little evidence to back up these assertions" (Marsh & Willis, 2007, p.

58), it none-the-less caused focus to lie in our deficits in education, and specifically on middle level education.

In response to the push for the reformation of middle level education, George and Alexander (1993) wrote,

> The concept of a bridging school is not enough . . . . Because children of middle school age have their unique characteristics and needs which cannot be subordinated to the impact of the elementary school nor to the demands of the high school. An effective middle school must not only build upon the program on earlier childhood and anticipate the program of secondary education to follow, but it must be directly concerned with the here-and-now problems and interests of its students. Furthermore, the middle school should not be envisioned as a passive link in the chain of education below the college and university, but rather as a dynamic force in improving education. (p. 2)

NASSP (1985) published *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, detailing the primary components of the Middle School Concept which George and Alexander (1993) were advocating for, including

(a) altering the culture and climate of the school to support excellence and achievement rather than intellectual conformity and mediocrity.

(b) providing opportunities for students to achieve and excel in a number of domains, including the arts, athletics, academics, and crafts.

(c) creating a caring, supportive atmosphere tolerant of and welcoming a wide angle of student diversity.

(d) establishing student advisement programs that would assure each student regular, compassionate, and supportive counsel from a concerned adult.

(e) fostering sensitivity to the needs of the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social conditions of students.

(f) creating opportunities for students to explore their aptitudes, interests, and special talents and to develop an accurate and positive self-concept.

(g) instituting a curriculum in which skills for continued learning were balanced with content coverage.

(h) relating curriculum content to the immediate concerns of the young adolescent, assuring its utility outside the classroom.

According to Beane and Lipka (2006), they "intended to implement it [the middle school concept] as an alternative to the impersonal, inequitable, and irrelevant structures and curriculums that characterized many junior high schools" (p. 27). The middle school concept was widely accepted, adopted, and implemented from the 1980s to the present and has dominated the educational landscape in terms of promoting the best instructional and organizational practices for adolescents (NMSA, 2003).

Unfortunately, it should also be noted that while some schools claimed to have adopted the middle school concept, the "changes were restricted largely to the names of the schools and the grades they contained" (MacIver & Epstein, 1993, p. 835) while their practices remained the same, mainly in contrast with the middle school concept. This is shown clearly in various national studies conducted by Dr. Kenneth McEwin. The most recent study was carried out in 2009.

While reform of middle level education had been stagnant with the adoption of the middle school concept, the introduction of *No Child Left Behind* (Diorio, 2008) once again sparked the need for reformation. NCLB is "by far the greatest movement toward curriculum alignment, high-stakes testing, and accountability" (Marsh & Willis, 2007, p.

62) that we have experienced in U.S. history. However, it should be noted that "NCLB ignores the work of such researchers . . . who have shown that research collectively demonstrates that American schools are functioning well and are steadily improving" (Marsh & Willis, 2007, p. 63). This emphasis on accountability put the schools under magnifying glasses and had us once again questioning the effectiveness of middle level education.

This demoralization of the middle school did not come without controversy. Dickinson and Butler (2001) stated,

> There is nothing wrong with the middle school concept . . . . The concept is as valid today as it was in either of its previous iterations at the turn of the 20th century or in the early 1960s. (pp. 3-4)

He argued that NCLB has given way to the regression of the model. Lounsbury (2009) further eluded to the middle school concept as "not been found wanting; rather, it has been found difficult to implement fully and is practiced, then, only partially" (p. 2). In regards to NCLB, Lounsbury was also quick to point out that

> the overemphasis on improving test scores works against developing the very attributes needed to succeed in today's global society – initiative; effectiveness in working as a part of a team; and the ability to organize information, articulate ideas, and solve problems. (p. 5)

This again speaks to the fact that educational reform has often taken place without regard to its developmental appropriateness.

Reversion back to K-8 schools. Regardless of the research that was inconclusive about the optimal grade configuration, in the early 2000s a massive school reform movement was launched that would eventually lead to the conversion of several hundred

middle schools into K-8 configurations (Hough, 2005). Weiss and Kipnes (2006) stated that these initiatives to reform or eliminate middle schools are being undertaken with an inadequate understanding of the middle school's effects relative to those of alternative schooling forms. Much like the emergence of the junior high and the middle school, the idea of merging K-8 back together has grown rapidly in popularity.

Byrnes and Ruby (2007) observed that while the existing research has been clear on what the advantages of K-8 schools over middle schools are and for what reasons they may exist, the actual amount of research that has been done is quite small considering how widely the policy of K-8 conversion is being adopted across the United States. The implication here is that we may have reformed again before we had an adequate research base to back up the reformation.

Herman (2004) tied the K-8 model all the way back to "the one-room schoolhouse, the nation's first model for middle level education" (p. 9). He went on to point out that "students received a considerable amount of individual attention in the one-room schools that were common in rural America in the 19th and early 20th centuries" (p. 9). Herman pointed to several specific characteristics of the one-room schoolhouse that are often found in K-8 schools today which include the integration of patriotic, legal, religious, and moral values within the school curriculum. Herman also hailed the one-room schoolhouse for providing opportunities for "cooperative learning and older students helping younger students" (p. 9).

The return to a K-8 grade configuration for the middle grades is most notable in large, urban school districts such as Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Harrisburg, Hartford, Milwaukee, Newark, New Orleans, New York City, Oklahoma City, Palm Beach, Philadelphia, and Phoenix (Abella, 2005; Anfara &

Buehler, 2005; George, 2005; Mizell, 2005). George (2005) suggested one reason for the increase in popularity of the K-8 grade configuration in these urban areas was to close "'troubled' 6-8 middle schools" (p. 6). Yecke (2006) continued to provide evidence of this transition by stating, "By 2008, the number of K-8 schools in Philadelphia will have increased from 61 to 130. Baltimore has opened 30 K-8 schools in the last few years. Districts like Brookline, Massachusetts, and Cincinnati, Ohio, are now exclusively K-8" (p. 20). Why is there such a dramatic transition?

Erb (2006) attempted to explain why so many large districts are transitioning by stating, "The fact that 6-8 schools are being phased out by several high profile urban districts because they are not working in order to implement K-8 configurations is no evidence that 'middle schools' are failing" (p. 4). Instead, he claimed that "Schools implementing the middle school concept are succeeding throughout the country; schools that are not – whatever their grade configurations – are not meeting expectations" (p. 4). Erb claimed that many of the large systems converting back to a K-8 configuration "are specifically criticized for failing to successfully implement small communities for learning" (p. 6). His implication is simply that small communities and interdisciplinary teams are vital components of the middle school concept, and without them it is not surprising that these districts have not experienced success in their 6-8 middle schools. These large districts are now hoping that by shifting to a K-8 configuration "that smallness along with fewer transitions will improve student performance" (Erb, 2006, p. 10). Erb went on to explain that while the transition to a smaller, community-oriented school may help some with achievement, they would experience more success by implementing components of the middle school concept.

In numerous studies that have included perception surveys, parents have indicated

that K-8 schools provide a stronger sense of community and improve the relationship between themselves and teachers than traditional middle schools (Pardini, 2002; Connolly et al., 2002). Ironically, a focus on community and relationships is actually a component of the middle school concept, so while parents are showing a preference for a K-8 model, in effect what they prefer is part of a true middle school as described in the middle school concept.

Hough (1995) recognized the importance grade configuration could have on the quality of young adolescents' education and called for a shift to what he referred to as the "elemiddle school," which he defined as "One that attends to the needs of young adolescents, aged 10 to 14, in any combination of grades 5 through 8, but is also part of an organizational structure that includes lower grades" (p. 7). Hough then clarified that while it appears that elemiddle schools hold great promise for reform efforts, the organizations of middle grade schools will probably remain a function of decision makers' personal preferences, community needs, and economic necessity (p. 9).

Grade-level debate continues. McEwin (1983) conducted a national survey of K-8 and 6-8 administrators and observed that the majority of 1,400 middle level principals considered 6-8 the ideal grade organizational pattern (p. 121). So the debate is currently still ensuing whether middle level students should be in their own facility or whether they should merge back with the elementary schools. While administrators seem to prefer the middle school (6-8), parents prefer the elementary school (K-8). We are still left with the question of what grade configuration is most conducive to meeting the needs of young adolescents. Paglin and Fager (1997) also declined to entirely support either K-8 schools or middle schools as being the best grade configuration for middle grade students as they explained, "Research has not provided definitive answers to the myriad

of possible questions about grade span" (p. 1).

Developmental needs of the young adolescent. While the history of education shows that we have not always been aware of young adolescents' developmental needs, we now know what those needs are and how imperative they are to the success of students. Lounsbury (2009) pointed out that

> it has only been in the recent decades that human development specialists have established a research-based that informs educators and others about youth in this key transition period as childhood wanes and adolescence comes into its own, roughly between ages 10 to 15. (p. 2)

What has been discovered by the variety of researchers is that individuals have changing emotional, cognitive, social needs, and personal goals as they mature; and schools need to change in developmentally appropriate ways if they are to provide the kind of social context that will continue to motivate student interest and engagement (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009, pp. 125-126).

So what are the unique needs the researchers allude to? NMSA (2003) stated that "it is vitally important to recognize that the areas of development – intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral are inexorably intertwined" (p. 3). The NMSA continued,

> Young adolescents reveal growing capacity for thinking about how they learn, for considering multiple ideas, and for planning steps to carry out their own learning activities . . . growth toward more mature and abstract ways of thinking.
>
> However, because cognitive growth occurs gradually and irregularly, most middle level students require ongoing, concrete, experiential learning in order to develop intellectually. (p. 3)

While the implication from above concerns the cognitive ability of young

adolescents, other developmental needs to consider when working with this age group are physical and emotional. NMSA (2003) reminded us that sexual development, which varies in maturation with girls and boys, affects students' self-perceptions and ultimately affects their relationships with peers and adults. This varied physical growth also makes health a priority. It is imperative at this age that young adolescents are explicitly taught how to maintain their health at this vulnerable stage in their development. Another consideration is the innate desire for peer acceptance, which can lead to poor decision making. These poor decisions can make it harder to maintain positive relationships with adults, which young adolescents yearn to have. Eder (1985) and Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, Feinman (1994) elaborated on this by stating that developmentally, the middle grades are generally a time of growing concern for popularity, with students placing increasing significance on interpersonal relationships. This shift in emphasis often results in increasingly nonconforming peer values, social competition, and mean behavior. Eder also mentioned that females are especially vulnerable at this age.

Eccles and Roeser (2011) also stated the following four concepts regarding the developmental needs of young adolescents:

1. Adolescents actively create their own identities through their social interactions.
2. The nature of the social interactions they can have are influenced by the worlds they inhabit.
3. These worlds are shaped in part by external structures in which they are allowed to participate and in part by their own choices.
4. These identities have implications for all aspects of their intellectual and social/emotional development.

The implications of these four concepts suggest that students should have choices within their sound, educational structure to create their identity that will affect all aspects of their development. In support of these ideas, Lounsbury (2009) also noted that "Sometime during the middle level years, students reach a level of mental maturity that permits them to be analytical, to question, to hypothesize . . . they are capable of learning and achieving at levels seldom realized" (p. 5).

Lounsbury (2009) also vehemently stated that "if middle level schools do not fulfill their historic, pastoral like role and help develop ethical, responsible, self-reliant, and clear-thinking individuals, they will have failed at what is, ultimately, their most important responsibility" (p. 5).

It should also be noted that the developmental needs of adolescents have evolved over time. According to DeJong and Craig (2002), sixth graders today are experiencing hormonal and physical changes comparable to those of seventh graders 40 years ago (p. 28). One hypothesis for these physical changes could arguably be natural reactions to the changes in today's society. With a current divorce rate of around 50% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014) and over 1,163,146 violent crimes reported by the FBI in 2013, our young adolescents are essentially on their own to deal with these societal changes.

The implication behind all of this research is that young adolescents have unique developmental needs that have to be met in order for them to be successful in the school setting. Also, these needs are changing as society changes and should be reassessed periodically.

Essential Components of Successful Schools that Meet Developmental Needs

Though there is little consensus about the grade configuration that best fits young

adolescents' needs, there is agreement about how to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. Obviously, McEwin and Greene (2011) have proven the middle school concept effective (when fully implemented). In consensus with McEwin and Greene, other experts are advocating the following for young adolescents.

Social/emotional needs are met. Scholars (Zimmer-Gembeck, Chipuer, Hanisch, Creed, & McGregor, 2006) argue that motivation, engagement, learning, and well-being will be highest in classrooms and schools where the climate and culture provide opportunities for the students to feel autonomous, competent, and emotionally supported. Such classrooms and schools would

1. Provide the students with a voice in how the classroom is run and what kinds of assignments are made.
2. Allow all students to be successful at the required academic and social tasks.
3. Provide emotional support to all students.

Another facet in looking at young adolescents' emotional needs is to consider a time when they can be advised by adults who advocate for them. In regards to advisory, the NMSA (2003) recommended middle schools use extended blocks of time, including homeroom period, as a way for educators to fulfill an advisory-like role, act as a mentor, and advocate for their students if a separate advisory period is unavailable.

In addition, Eccles and Roeser (2011) argued that being involved in constructive, organized activities and service learning settings are good for adolescents because

1. Doing good things with one's time takes time away from opportunities to get involved in risky activities.
2. One can learn good things (like specific competencies, prosocial values, and attitudes) while engaged in constructive and/or service learning activities.

3. Involvement in organized activity and service learning settings increases the possibility of establishing positive social supports and networks and prosocial values.

Finally, "Research on both middle schools and K-8 schools clearly suggests the importance of creating small learning communities, high-quality relationships, and strong transition supports" (Beane & Lipka, 2006, p. 29).

Cognitive needs are met. In regards to meeting the cognitive needs of students, teaming is a component that has proven successful in meeting the needs of young adolescents. NMSA (2010) clarified that "Interdisciplinary teaming, typically consisting of two to five teachers from various subject areas and the students they share, is considered the 'signature component' of middle school organization" (p. 31). George (2009) also contributed to this theory by stating, "The interdisciplinary team organization probably stands as the movement's most significant contribution to educational organization" (p. 5).

Middle school interdisciplinary teaming and its complimentary structures such as advisory and small learning teams with fewer teachers and less transitions are aspects that organize students and teachers and may influence the responsiveness of school environments (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; NMSA, 2010). To further validate this point, Jackson, Davis, Abeel, and Bordonaro (2000) stated that interdisciplinary teaming promotes a psychological home within the school that helps reduce the stress of isolation and promotes a sense of belonging. Effective teams utilize structures, like advisory, to "offer students and teachers a dynamic structure for forging close relationships" (Jackson et al., 2000, p. 142).

Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) conducted a research study to discover why one

interdisciplinary team was so successful. The findings provided insight of their utilization of flexible block scheduling, homeroom, and extended teacher planning time. They were able to work together to foster a developmentally responsive environment. "This resulted in a sense of personalization, connectedness, and positive peer relationships for its eighth-grade students" (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013, p. 20).

Similar to the above research study, another success story is found in Clarence Edwards Middle School. This was a low-performing school in Boston on the verge of shutting down (2020, Mass., 2012).

> But by 2009, a renaissance at the Edwards made it one of the highest performing and most desired middle schools in Boston, dramatically narrowing and even eliminating academic achievement gaps while delivering a far more well-rounded education to its high-poverty student population. (2020, Mass., 2012, p. 1)

So how did they organize their school to ensure success? Rather than closing down or converting to a K-8 model, as we have seen unsuccessful middle schools do, they dramatically changed their routine. "They added time for, and provided individualized support in core academic subjects; increased enrichment opportunities that had been stripped from the school day; and brainstormed about how teachers might collaborate more" (2020, Mass., 2012, p. 2). In essence, they added components of the middle school concept and not only were able to keep their school but were able to become a leader in school transformations.

Physical needs are met. Scholars also concur that participation in school-based extracurricular activities has been linked to increases on such positive developmental outcomes as GPA, strong school engagement, and high educational aspirations (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). Regardless of grade configuration, schools that meet the

developmental needs of young adolescents have programs in place that support the extracurricular interests of its students.

DeJong and Craig (2002) may have said it most clearly when he stated that "When we build classrooms for older children, we need to think kindergarten" (p. 32). His rationale was that in order to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents, we have been advocating for more hands-on project-based curriculum, much like the way kindergarten is taught. He continued to state that adolescents are two to three times the size of a kindergartener and therefore the physical environment of the classroom needs to be much larger (DeJong & Craig, 2002, p. 32).

Middle school concept. Regardless of grade span, there is a growing consensus for supporting the middle school concept. Beane and Lipka (2006) clarified further by stating,

> This approach is developmentally responsive to young adolescents. For example, they link small teaching teams to young adolescents' need for a sense of belonging and security; improved family relationships to their need for a support system through puberty's ups and downs; an integrative curriculum to their need for meaningful contexts for learning; and more appropriate teacher preparation to the many ways in which young adolescents differ from younger children and older adolescents. (p. 27)

In summation of the best practices involving young adolescents, George (2009) stated, "The emerging consensus surrounding developmentally appropriate programs center on the strategies and practices found to be most effective by early and later adopters of the middle school concept" (p. 5). This is further proven by multiple researchers stating that the various practices promoted by the middle school concept have

independently shown considerable promise for improving achievement, engagement, and relationships: small teaching teams, authentic instruction, integrative curriculum, service learning, and affective mentorship (Beane & Lipka, 2006; NMSA, 2003). George summed up this comprehensive list by stating that they help in meeting the developmental needs of this age group by "personalizing the learning environment" (p. 7). George elaborated further by stating that these best practices grew from several decades of devoted effort and that the middle school movement "is an amazing success story in the history of American education" (p. 7).

Implications for Grade Configuration based on Research regarding Developmental Needs of Young Adolescents

In support of the K-8 model. In one of the most comprehensive studies of middle school effectiveness, Weiss and Kipnes (2006) examined longitudinal data from Philadelphia Public Schools in relation to 6-8 and K-8 schools. The researchers concluded that middle school students had significantly lower levels of self-esteem and perceived their school environment as significantly more threatening than students who attended K-8 schools, though effect sizes were not reported for either finding. Weiss and Kipnes stated a number of researchers have offered data to argue that middle schools are detrimental to student self-esteem, especially for girls.

In regard to Weiss and Kipnes's (2006) second observation pertaining to safety, Astor, Meyer, and Pitner (2001) also established that sixth graders in middle schools were much more likely than sixth graders in elementary schools to perceive multiple and specific threats in their school environments. In congruence with Astor et al., Anderman (2002) also noted that students who attended middle schools were more likely than students in K-8 schools to report feeling victimized or to perceive their school as being

unsafe. Anderman showed that students who attended K-8 or K-12 schools in the middle grades reported a slightly greater sense of belonging as compared to students in middle schools and argued that these feelings, in turn, are positively related to optimism and GPA and negatively related to depression, social rejection, and school problems. These results all lend themselves to argue that the K-8 model is more appropriate to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents as the NMSA (2010) would argue that it is essential that students feel empowered and safe in their learning environment in order to be successful.

In another research study by Eccles et al. (1993), conclusions also favored the K-8 model. The argument pertained to adolescents experiencing a mismatch between their developmental needs and the opportunities afforded by their school when transitioning into a larger, more traditionally organized secondary school environment. They projected that this mismatch would then result in decreased motivation and engagement experienced in their school. Such changes (referring to junior high teachers) in student-teacher relationships are also likely to undermine the sense of community and trust between students and teachers, leading to a lowered sense of efficacy among the teachers, an increased reliance on authoritarian control practices by the teachers, and an increased sense of alienation among the students (Eccles et al., 1993). It became obvious through their research that the negative impacts of the junior high or middle school model outweighed the benefits of the K-8 model where students and teachers seemed to both feel more successful.

Again, Midgley and Edelin (1998) made the case for a K-8 model by similarly claiming that junior highs and middle schools feature curricula that are focused more on impersonal tasks and less on personal relationships between students and teachers, in

contrast to elementary schools' greater focus on personal aspects of schooling. This also implies that the middle school is not meeting the social and personal needs of the adolescent as well as the K-8 model. This is further proven by Connolly et al.'s (2002) statement that "K-8 schools quickly become communities rather than institutions" (p. 28).

Later, Eccles et al. (1993) defined the mismatch between curriculum and developmental needs as the Stage-Environment Fit theory. For example, most junior high schools are substantially larger than elementary schools, and instruction is more likely to be organized departmentally. As a result, junior high school teachers typically teach several different groups of students, making it very difficult for students to form a close relationship with any school-affiliated adult precisely at the point in development when there is a great need for guidance and support from adults. This structure simply does not allow for much individualized student attention or personal student-teacher relationships. As a consequence, motivational or academic problems are more likely to go unnoticed (Eccles et al., 1993). This theory supports the findings from Midgley and Edelin (1998) as well as Eccles et al. (2003) that the middle school is not developmentally conducive to meeting the needs of young adolescents.

Franklin and Glascock (1996) also observed higher attendance rates and lower incidents of expulsions and suspensions when comparing K-8 schools to middle schools. "The research pertaining to the social-emotional well-being of adolescents offers the strongest, most well documented case against junior high and middle school configurations as being the most appropriate organizational structure for adolescent students" (Clark, 2012). Seidman et al. (1994) similarly found that students perceived less support from their teachers and greater hassles in daily school life in junior high.

It has been established that numerous researchers would document lower levels of

self-esteem among students in junior high schools, and later middle schools, when compared to students in K-8 schools (Eccles et al., 1991; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Later researchers (e.g., Cook et al., 2008) would also comment on the negative social/emotional effects of resetting sixth-grade students back to the bottom rung of the social ladder in the three-tier middle school model. In support of the middle school lowering self-esteem among students, Merten (1997) conducted a research study and discovered that the middle school provides a structure to facilitate negative behaviors such as cruelty or meanness among students.

In *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, it was quoted there was a "Volatile mismatch . . . between the organization and curriculum of middle grades schools, and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of young adolescents" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 32).

Blyth, Simmons, and Bush (1978) concluded that the K-8 school structure supported student involvement with their peers and with extracurricular activities, while the junior high school dampened student participation, despite the larger number of extracurricular activities offered. Comparisons of middle school teachers and elementary school teachers show that middle school teachers typically grade more stringently than elementary school teachers (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). The tougher grading standards and teacher expectations are related not only to student grades but also to their academic self-perceptions (Murdock, Anderman, & Hodge, 2000).

In summation, the efforts to assess whether the middle school as an educational form is meeting the needs of its students in regards to academic, psychological, and social outcomes, has concluded that middle schools are not good for early adolescents (e.g., Anderman & Maehr 1994; Eccles et al., 1991; see also Juvonen, 2004).

In support of the middle school (6-8) model. As quickly as you can find evidence to support the K-8 model, there is conflicting research in support of the middle school (6-8) model. MacIver and Epstein (1993) found that middle schools emphasize active learning techniques and other beneficial instructional approaches more than other schooling forms for the same grades. They argued this was found more frequently and developmentally more responsive than in the K-8 models.

Connolly et al. (2002) offered, "the K-8 grade configuration does not allow for programs to address the particular developmental needs of any specific age group" (p. 29). The implication behind this allegation is that the K-8 model also has to cater to children in grades kindergarten through fifth grade in addition to serving the middle school students. This does not always allow sufficient resources to meet the unique needs of young adolescents. This is further addressed in Beane and Lipka's (2006) comments that

> Those considering K-8 schools must understand, however, that this configuration comes with its own set of potential problems. For example, resource reductions accompanying smaller middle-grades enrollments would likely reduce the number of specialized electives, services, accelerated courses, and extracurricular activities that some parents want for their children. (p. 29)

Other advocates for the traditional middle school configuration suggest that developmental needs, discipline problems, and specialized classrooms for the older students are better provided in a separate school (McEwin & Alexander, 1990).

Middle school grade span configurations (i.e., 6-8, 6-9) were ideal for best practices such as team teaching, mixed-level classrooms, and small learning communities (Epstein & MacIver, 1990; Hough, 2005). These practices, as noted in numerous reports

from the NMSA, are imperative in meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents.

In response to the reports that K-8 schools were favored due to the students' academic success, Beane and Lipka (2006) replied that the "scores still fall short of state and national averages" (p. 28), and that the "K-8 advantage seems to disappear in the 9th grade" (p. 28, citing Abella, 2005), concluding that "K-8 schools do not necessarily outperform middle schools when both serve high-poverty students" (p. 28). In summation, Beane and Lipka exuberantly felt there are gaps in the research regarding grade configuration and which one is best for our young adolescents.

Inconclusive reports. Many researchers have tried and failed to come to a determination of the best grade configuration to meet adolescent needs. According to the Educational Research Service (1983), reviews of research conducted during the first 20 years of middle schools found that a change in a school's grade span had little effect on educational practices in the middle grades.

Similarly, a research study by Roeser, Eccles, and Sameroff (2000) found rather than grade span, both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have shown that the quality of teacher-student relationships and student feelings of classroom belonging predict changes in student academic motivation, engagement and learning, and social-emotional well-being in school. This implies that relationship between students and teachers is more indicative of student scores than grade configuration.

Larson and Richards (1991) showed that although boredom in school is typical for students in middle school, students in the same grades in other schooling forms exhibit identical levels of boredom. These findings suggest that for some outcomes, the particular school form may be less important than factors such as stage of development.

Similarly, the United States Office of Education (1974) released a Report of the National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education stating that due to a lack of research, they did not determine one organizational pattern was more effective than the other.

Weiss and Kipnes (2006) stated that in contrast to previous research findings and widely held beliefs about the effects of middle schools, our findings offer little support for reformers seeking to improve student performance in the middle grades by eliminating middle schools.

The Current Status of America's Middle Schools

Dr. Ken McEwin and Dr. Melanie Greene conducted a national survey in 2009 to gain perspective on the current status of our middle schools' programs and practices. This was a follow-up study to the four studies that had been conducted previously (McEwin & Greene, 2011). As it had been several years without a national survey and previous results had shown that middle schools had failed to fully implement developmentally responsive programs, there was "rather vocal criticism of the middle school and middle school concept" (McEwin & Greene, 2011, p. 60). Due to this, McEwin and Greene (2011) wanted to assess the current status of the middle schools to discover if the middle school concept was being embraced and implemented.

"A 20% random stratified sample (2,783) of public middle schools that included grades 5-8, 6-8, or 7-8 (13,918 schools) was selected. The return rate for the survey was 30%" (McEwin & Greene, 2011, p. 9). This study had two parts. The first was to send out the electronic survey to the randomly selected middle schools in the nation and obtain data on where they currently stood regarding middle grades' practices and programs. These data were then compared to the data gathered from the previous national studies.

The results containing the percentage of agreement on what practices are being valued and at what implementation of the randomly selected middle schools are shown in the table on the following page.

Table 2

2009 Middle School Data of Random Sample

Middle School Concept Component	Level of Importance				Level of Implementation			
	VI	I	U	VU	HI	I	LI	NI
Advisory Programs	36	51	12	2	17	29	24	29
Interdisciplinary Team Organization	63	30	7	<1	45	27	19	9
Flexible Scheduling and Grouping	48	40	12	<1	22	33	33	13
Strong Focus on Basic Subjects	78	22	0	0	73	25	2	0
Educators who Value Working with Young Adolescents	94	6	0	0	53	44	3	0
Inviting, Supportive, Safe Environment	94	6	0	0	65	33	3	0
Teachers and Students Engaged in Active Learning	92	8	0	0	42	49	9	0
School Initiated Family and Community Partnerships	51	47	2	0	19	46	34	2
Curriculum that is Relevant, Challenging, Integrative & Exploratory	88	12	0	0	40	52	8	0
Multiple Teaching and Learning Approaches	85	15	0	0	31	57	11	0
School-wide Efforts to Foster Health, Wellness, and Safety	65	34	1	0	35	51	14	0
Teachers with Middle School/Level Teacher Certification/Licensure	35	49	14	2	27	36	27	10
Trusting/Respective Relationships Among Admin, Teachers, Parents	89	11	0	0	46	48	6	0
Evidence-Based Decision Making	70	29	1	0	32	57	11	0
A Shared Vision of Mission and Goals	79	21	0	0	42	52	6	0
Assessment and Evaluation Programs that Promote Quality Learning	77	23	0	0	35	52	13	0

Note. VI: Very Important; I: Important; U: Unimportant; VU: Very unimportant; HI: Highly Implemented; I: Implemented; LI: Limited Implementation; NI: Not Implemented.

There are some noticeable conclusions that can be drawn from the table above.

Overall, the components of the middle school concept are still greatly valued. However, it is also apparent that even though these components are seen as essential elements in a successful middle school, they are not always implemented. If you add together the first two levels under each category (very important/important and highly implemented/ implemented), some large discrepancies are made apparent in how important the components are versus how well they are implemented. Some recognizable deficits are found with flexible scheduling and grouping (88% vs. 55%), advisory programs (87% vs. 46%), teachers with middle school/level teacher certification/licensure (84% vs. 63%), and school and community partnerships (98% vs. 65%).

The second part of this study was to survey previously identified HSMS. One hundred eighty-six middle schools had been identified as Schools to Watch or NASSP Breakthrough Middle Schools. Electronic surveys were sent to these 186 schools which elicited responses from 101 schools for a return rate of 54% (McEwin & Greene, 2011). McEwin and Greene (2011) utilized the same survey in an attempt to compare the practices and programs of HSMS with the other middle schools across the nation (with minor differences). This would then determine if the current successful practices still aligned with the middle school concept; and in effect if traditional middle schools utilizing the middle school concept are still the best developmentally appropriate option for young adolescents. The table below shows these results from the HSMS.

Table 3

2009 Middle School Data of HSMS

Middle School Concept Component	Level of Importance				Level of Implementation			
	VI	I	U	VU	HI	I	LI	NI
Advisory Programs	42	49	7	1	26	30	24	20
Interdisciplinary Team Organization	81	17	2	0	71	17	7	5
Flexible Scheduling and Grouping	71	25	2	1	41	42	13	5
Strong Focus on Basic Subjects	88	12	0	0	87	13	0	0
Educators who Value Working with Young Adolescents	99	1	0	0	86	13	1	0
Inviting, Supportive, Safe Environment	99	1	0	0	77	20	2	0
Teachers and Students Engaged in Active Learning	100	0	0	0	61	37	1	0
School Initiated School and Community Partnerships	64	36	0	0	19	63	18	0
Curriculum that is Challenging, Integrative, and Exploratory	94	6	0	0	60	34	6	0
Multiple Teaching and Learning Approaches	93	7	0	0	54	38	8	0
School-wide Efforts to Foster Health, Wellness, and Safety	74	26	0	0	49	40	11	0
Teachers with Middle School/Level Teacher Certification/Licensure	30	56	13	1	31	31	26	12
Trusting/Respective Relationships Among Admin, Teachers, Parents	92	8	0	0	70	30	0	0
Evidence-Based Decision Making	88	11	1	0	52	41	6	1
A Shared Vision of Mission and Goals	85	15	0	0	61	37	1	0
Assessment and Evaluation Programs that Promote Quality Learning	87	13	0	0	50	45	5	0

Again, there were similar findings concerning obvious deficits in the same areas of flexible scheduling and grouping (96% vs. 83%), advisory programs (91% vs. 56%),

teachers with middle school/level teacher certification/licensure (86% vs. 62%), and school and community partnerships (100% vs. 82%). The difference however is that even though there are discrepancies in the percentage of importance verses implementation, it shows that overall the HSMS are implementing these practices more frequently. In an effort to look at the overall difference of implementation between the randomly selected middle schools and the HSMS, the table below illustrates those findings.

Table 4

Levels of Implementation of Middle Level Components: 2009 HSMS vs. Random Study

Middle School Concept Component	Level of Implementation in HSMS				Level of Implementation in Randomly Selected Schools			
	HI	I	LI	NI	HI	I	LI	NI
Advisory Programs	26	30	24	20	17	29	24	29
Interdisciplinary Team Organization	71	17	7	5	45	27	19	9
Flexible Scheduling and Grouping	41	42	13	5	22	33	33	13
Strong Focus on Basic Subjects	87	13	1	0	65	33	3	0
Educators who Value Working with Young Adolescents	77	20	2	0	53	44	3	0
Inviting, Supportive, Safe Environment	86	13	1	0	65	33	3	0
Teachers and Students Engaged in Active Learning	61	37	1	0	42	49	9	0
School Initiated School and Community Partnerships	19	63	18	0	19	46	34	2
Curriculum that is Challenging, Integrative, and Exploratory	60	34	6	0	40	52	8	0
Multiple Teaching and Learning Approaches	54	38	8	0	41	57	11	0
School-wide Efforts to Foster Health, Wellness, and Safety	49	40	11	0	35	51	14	0
Teachers with Middle School/Level Teacher Certification/Licensure	31	31	26	12	27	36	27	10
Trusting/Respective Relationships Among Admin, Teachers, Parents	70	30	0	0	46	48	6	0
Evidence-Based Decision Making	52	41	6	1	32	57	11	0
A Shared Vision of Mission and Goals	61	37	1	0	42	52	6	0
Assessment and Evaluation Programs that Promote Quality Learning	50	45	5	0	35	52	13	0

When comparing the HSMS with the randomly selected middle schools, it is

apparent that all components of the middle school concept are implemented more frequently at the HSMS. Although not all of the numbers show a large difference, one of the components that stood out was the flexible schedule and grouping (83% vs. 55%). This difference alone could help to determine why the HSMS are more effective.

McEwin and Greene (2011) concluded with the following results: "As documented in the survey results, HSMS tend to embrace programs and practices associated with developmentally responsive schools—the middle school concept" (p. 58). McEwin and Greene then listed his most significant results with both studies on why the HSMS may be more effective (pp. 58-59). The summation of that list is included in the following paragraphs.

First, the HSMS more frequently provided core teachers with 10 common planning periods per week (40% vs. 28%). Along the same lines, they also more frequently used interdisciplinary team organization (90% vs. 72%) as well as more often used the flexible block scheduling plan (30% vs. 14%). Also with regard to their schedules, the HSMS allotted more daily instructional time to core subjects of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies at the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade levels (sixth grade, 240 vs. 226; seventh grade, 234 vs. 219; eighth grade, 233 vs. 219) and more frequently offered interest course/mini-course programs (49% vs. 39%).

With regard to how instruction was delivered, the HSMS used direct instruction less frequently (71% vs. 81%) and used cooperative learning more often (85% vs. 64%) as well as inquiry teaching more frequently (57% vs. 43%). Also, the HSMS used ability/tracking somewhat more frequently in most core subjects.

McEwin and Greene (2011) also noted that the HSMS had higher percentages of core teachers holding separate middle level teacher licensure. In addition, these schools

more frequently had advisory programs (65% vs. 54%) and placed a stronger emphasis on global education elements. In an effort to meet the students' physical needs, these schools also more frequently offered intramural sports programs (65% vs. 55%).

McEwin and Greene (2011) were able to sum up this list by stating that the HSMS more strongly supported and implemented the components of middle level schools as recommended in the middle school literature.

If the middle school concept is still deemed effective and worthy of implementation across the nation, the question of what grade configuration is the most effective still exists. Although the randomly selected middle schools were all deemed middle schools by grade configuration (5-8, 6-8, 7-8), there were several schools identified as HSMS that utilized a different school structure. The table below shows the number of grade organization patterns within the HSMS study.

Table 5

Grade Organization Patterns within the HSMS study

Grade Organization	Number in Study
5-8	7
6-8	65
7-8	15
Other	13
Total	101

The "other" as noted within the chart contains the following breakdown: PK-8, 2; 4-8, 1; 5-6, 2; 6 only, 1; 6-7, 4; 7-9, 3; so while McEwin and Greene's (2011) study validated that the middle school concept is still effective, it did not clarify in what grade configuration it can be implemented with the most fidelity to meet the needs of young

adolescents. Although a couple PK-8 schools were surveyed, it was only because they had been previously recognized as being highly successful. This study is lacking data to determine which grade configuration best implements the middle school concept.

Synthesis of Literature

The debate over grade configuration is not a new one and is unlikely to be resolved anytime in the near future as Beane and Lipka (2006) declared it has been "a rollercoaster of reform" (p. 26). Through a series of evolutions from the junior high to the middle school, and now possibly back to K-8, the question is what grade configuration meets the developmental needs of young adolescents? Currently, most educational structures housing young adolescents are doing so in a middle school (6-8) structure. Herman (2004) noted that "the middle school still predominates in public schools in our nation" (p. 7). The figure below shows the number of public middle schools McEwin and Greene found in 2009 and published in 2011.

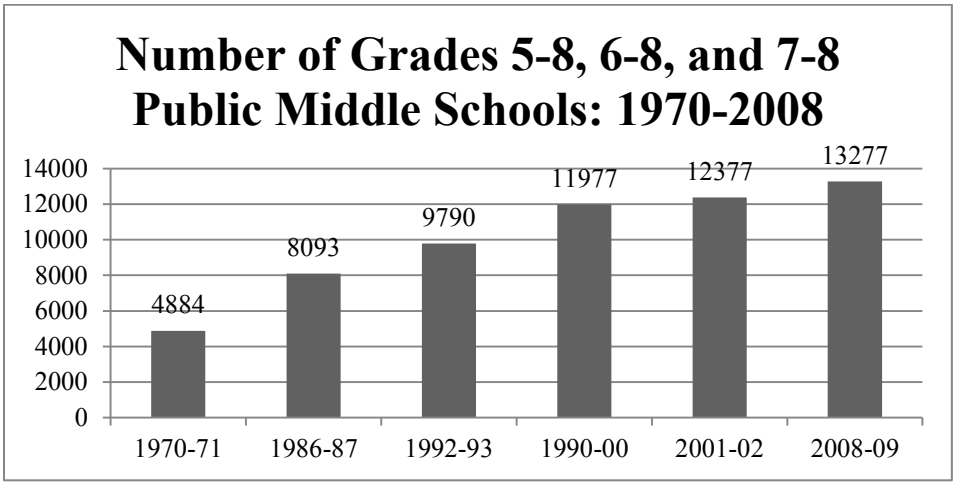

Figure. *Number of Middle Schools from 1970-2008 (McEwin & Greene, 2011, p.6).*

The discrepancy in the literature is whether this predominance of middle schools is to blame for the deficit in education that has been reflected through No Child Left

Behind. While researchers such as Eccles adamantly support a K-8 structure that they feel is more developmentally responsive, there are also researchers such as McEwin who just as adamantly proclaim that the middle school concept implemented fully in a middle school setting is most appropriate for this age group. As McEwin and Greene (2011) noted, "The most important finding of the 2009 surveys is that the middle school concept and philosophy remain legitimate" (p. 62). George (2009) supported this thought by reminding us that "The existence of thousands of high-quality middle schools is evidence of this major achievement" (p. 7).

There is reason to believe that more research is needed in an effort to resolve this conflict of understanding. Researchers such as Hough argue that reforms are continually being made without a significant research base to support the claims. We have seen how this was done in our past with the hasty development of the junior high, the then hasty transition to a middle school, and now the hasty reversion back to K-8 models in large, urban districts.

Ultimately, the decision may come down to finances. As Look (2001) explained, "Some districts find K-8 schools to be less expensive to operate than simultaneously running elementary and middle schools" (p. 2). This concept may prove why the debate of grade configuration even exists. Had we not made significant decisions regarding education based on money in the past, but rather on the needs of the students, the argument for grade configuration could reasonably be null as we would have established the best practice years ago.

Even if the debate over grade configuration is never settled, Lounsbury (2009) further reminded us that "The public also must come to recognize that success, in future schooling and in life itself, will depend not so much on what courses have been passed

but rather on what skills, dispositions, and habits of mind have been developed" (p. 5). This implies that grade configuration may end up not being the marker of success, rather what is taught within those grades ultimately makes the most significant difference.

Summary

In this chapter, various literatures were explored pertaining to grade configuration and the role they have played historically in meeting young adolescents' developmental needs. The overview of literature began with an examination of the history of education and specifically how the middle school has evolved over the years. Next, the developmental needs of adolescents were noted and how this age group possesses unique attributes that need to be recognized. Following this, research studies were discussed and their findings with regards to which grade configuration met the developmental needs of young adolescents were provided. Next, literature was addressed that gave best practice suggestions to meet the needs of young adolescents regardless of grade configuration. Last, a summation of the current status of our middle schools as found by McEwin and Greene (2011) was provided. Throughout the literature review, there was conflicting information regarding which grade configuration best suits the unique needs of adolescents as the results were inconclusive or contradictory to each other. More research is needed to determine what grade configuration best meets the developmental needs of young adolescents.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Restatement of the Problem

Historically, young adolescents have been taught in a multitude of grade configurations in an effort to meet societal needs or to increase student achievement. In doing this, the developmental needs of young adolescents have often been overlooked. While there is a prominence of traditional middle schools (6-8) in the United States, recently a movement to revert back to a K-8 model has gained momentum and is causing massive reform and controversy over what grade configuration best serves this unique age group. This research study was an effort to discover what grade configuration best meets the developmental needs of young adolescents, as student success is dependent on these needs being met.

This chapter states the specific research questions, design, and methodology the researcher utilized to conduct this research study.

Research Questions

1. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the social/emotional needs of young adolescents?
2. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the physical needs of young adolescents?
3. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the cognitive needs of young adolescents?
4. What is the relationship between the constructs of developmental needs (social/emotional, physical, cognitive) and academic achievement?

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods design to strengthen the overall findings of the

research study by combining both statistical results with qualitative perspectives of the participants that were used to unveil themes and associations in the quantitative data (Creswell, 2013). This mixed-methods study used data from three surveys to seek a relationship in meeting developmental needs and positive student perceptions. The first variable was what opportunities were offered to meet young adolescents' developmental needs as defined by their social/emotional, cognitive, and physical needs. The second variable was the student perceptions within the separate grade configurations concerning their school experiences. By analyzing the data for a relationship, Glanz (2003) stated that it is then possible to "indicate the degree to which these two variables relate to one another" (p. 65). This design therefore answered the question which grade configuration is most appropriate to meet young adolescents' developmental needs.

In addition to the quantitative data gathered from the surveys, the researcher also conducted focus groups (composed of core and elective teachers and some administration) at each of the seven participating schools. These qualitative data were used to look for themes that were also apparent in the surveys as well as new information in the perceptions of the teachers that contributed to this body of research.

Research Methodology

The researcher compared seven schools located in northwest North Carolina. Three of these schools served students in Grades K-8 and four served students in Grades 6-8. McEwin and Greene's (2011) National Middle School Survey was electronically accessible to all schools through a link provided on a website made by the researcher. This survey was broken down into separate surveys for the teachers and administrators in an effort to make the survey more compact for the participants. The principals received a survey asking for logistical information regarding their school and what opportunities are

offered that would meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. The electronic version of this survey can be found by clicking here and is also located in Appendix A. The teachers received a separate survey regarding the level of significance verses the level of implementation of various middle school components within their schools. The electronic version of this survey can be found here as well as in Appendix B. In both surveys, the opportunities afforded to young adolescents were categorized by meeting either the social/emotional, physical, or cognitive developmental needs. The closed-ended questions utilized a Likert scale. The only modifications made to the National Middle School Survey were to omit questions that did not pertain directly to meeting developmental needs of young adolescents and to separate the survey into smaller sections so that the administration and the teachers received separate parts of the larger survey. This significantly decreased the length of the survey. In addition, the option for a K-8 grade-level configuration was added as the National Survey was only given to "traditional" middle schools serving students in 5-8, 6-8, or 7-8. Due to the inclusion of K-8 schools in this research, many of the questions had a disclaimer to only include information pertaining to young adolescents in Grades 6-8 within their buildings.

Next, the student population was surveyed on their perceptions of their school experience by also providing an anonymous and voluntary survey through a website the researcher created called gradelevelconfiguration.weebly.com. This survey was entitled "Perceived School Experiences Scale" and was utilized with permission from Dawn Anderson-Butcher who currently teaches at Ohio State University and developed the survey with her colleagues in an effort to measure three "critical dimensions of students' experiences in schools—school connectedness, academic motivation, and academic press" (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012, p. 187). This survey can be found in Appendix C

or electronically here. This survey contained 16 questions all utilizing a Likert scale of 1-5 with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree.

The opportunities afforded to students through the teacher and administrator surveys were sorted as either meeting the social/emotional, physical, or cognitive needs of the young adolescents. In doing this, the researcher was able to assess if schools were implementing opportunities that would meet the young adolescents' developmental needs. Next, the researcher assessed the perceptions of the students at each grade-level configuration. If there was an overall positive perception (an average of 4 or higher on the Likert scale), a relationship was found that offering and implementing developmentally responsive opportunities results in positive student perceptions.

Next, the testing data of each of the schools was observed and compared to the school's ability to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents (as deemed by the relationship found from the previous two surveys). If schools that met the developmental needs of young adolescents also obtained higher academic achievement, this would determine yet another relationship in meeting the needs of young adolescents leading to higher academic achievement.

Last, the researcher conducted focus groups with each of the seven schools. The questions used for these focus groups can be found in Appendix D. The groups' conversations were recorded to ensure accurate reporting, and the names of the participants were coded to ensure confidentiality. The data gathered at these focus groups was then categorized to find themes. These themes were compared with the data collected from the surveys in an effort to further validate the findings from the surveys as well as look for new themes that may not have arisen with a quantitative survey. Triangulating this data with multiple research approaches strengthened the information

ascertained through this study.

Surveys

The surveys for the administration, teachers, and students can be found in Appendix A, Appendix B, and Appendix C. The administrator and teacher surveys were located on the website (gradelevelconfiguration.weebly.com). The student surveys were located in a separate website (gradelevelconfigurationstudent.weebly.com) to ensure that students did not have access to the teacher surveys. Both websites provided an explanation of the intended research and links to the surveys. The website URL addresses were delivered electronically to the principals who then forwarded them to the appropriate middle school personnel. Additionally, the researcher placed reminders with the website on it in each teacher's mailbox when visiting the schools to conduct focus groups. The surveys were created utilizing Survey Monkey, an online survey creation tool, and were therefore automatically collected there upon participants' completion of the surveys. The middle school teachers received the separate website for the students with the link so they could pass that along to the students to have them access and submit electronically as well.

Research Population

The research population was seven schools in northwest North Carolina. This particular location was chosen because they are the only county in northwest North Carolina that offers multiple grade-level configurations to educate their young adolescents. The researcher gained permission to study three schools that served students in Grades K-8 and four schools that served students in Grades 6-8. The following table breaks down the grade-level configuration of the schools.

Table 6

Names and Types of Grade Configurations for Research Population

6-8 Schools	K-8 Schools
School A	School E
School B	School F
School C	School G
School D	

Data Analysis

The data were collected and aggregated by the researcher using Survey Monkey. As the participants completed the surveys, this program then collected the data and created charts and tables analyzing the information.

The data were examined first for return rate from the various schools in an effort to see how the data were reflective of the total population. Next the administrator and teacher surveys were analyzed quantitatively by what opportunities were offered at what schools. Charts were made tallying the results on each question indicating whether the respondent answered 1-4 (1 indicating lowest level of importance/implementation and 4 indicating the highest level of importance/implementation). Percentages were created to reflect the total responses for each question, yielding two charts (K-8/6-8). These percentages indicated how important/implemented each of these opportunities afforded to young adolescents were within their grade-level configuration.

Once results were converted to percentages for each grade configuration, the two charts were separated into the three categories of social/emotional, cognitive, and physical needs based on the nature of the question. Questions pertaining to advisory programs, family/community partnerships, and the climate were categorized under the

social/emotional category. Questions regarding the curriculum, teaming, scheduling, grouping, and teaching practices were categorized as cognitive needs. Last, opportunities regarding health, wellness, and sports programs were classified as physical needs. This gave each grade-level configuration three separate charts to represent how important and at what rate of implementation they were meeting young adolescents' developmental needs. Charts were then made to compare the two separate grade-level configurations under each category. In doing this, the researcher was able to answer the separate questions of which grade-level configuration met each developmental need of young adolescents most effectively.

The next step was analyzing the students' perceptions of their relative schools. The students were asked to rate their perception on a Likert scale of 1-5 (1 indicating the lowest and 5 reflecting the highest) with questions regarding their perceptions of how safe and supported they feel in their current learning environment. The surveys were then sorted based on their grade-level configuration. Next, the student responses were tallied under each question and converted into percentages to represent how the student population answered each question for each grade configuration. Last, charts were made to compare the students' perceptions in both grade-level configurations.

Once the researcher had charts representing the opportunities afforded to young adolescents under each developmental category (social/emotional, cognitive, physical) and charts showing the perceptions of students within each grade-level configuration, a relationship was looked for in meeting developmental needs and positive student perceptions.

Last, after a grade-level configuration was deemed as being more effective at meeting young adolescents' developmental needs, the schools' academic achievement

was compared utilizing their EOG assessments in reading and math. The proficiency levels were gathered within the administrator survey and validated using ncschoolreportcards.org. This data collection was done to see if there was also a relationship in the students whose needs were being met and higher academic achievement.

Last, the focus groups' coded data were categorized by themes and compared with the quantitative data from the surveys in an effort to confirm or disconfirm the findings gathered from the surveys.

Ethical Implications and Considerations

In accordance with the Belmont Report, published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the researcher followed basic ethical principles. Specifically, the participants in this study were treated as autonomous agents and entered this study with adequate background knowledge of the implications of participating. This was done through the letter that was sent to the superintendent requesting participation as well as the website having information regarding the purpose and possible implications of the study. The informed consent form to participate in the quantitative part of the study can be located in Appendix E. Additionally, the focus group participants also were provided a consent form to participate in the qualitative portion of this study. This consent form can be found in Appendix F.

In regards to beneficence, as noted in the Belmont Report, participants were ensured no harm would come to them. This was done through the assurance that no consequences were given for opting out of the study in addition to assuring confidentiality of the participants who chose to participate. It was not necessary to identify the students beyond school and grade-level, so anonymity was guaranteed. For

the sake of this research, the schools were assigned letters. In doing this, if there were significant findings about one school not meeting the needs of young adolescents, they were protected from that information being published. In addition, the participants within the focus groups were given pseudonyms for the purposes of reporting findings.

Also in accordance with the Belmont Report, the researcher took into consideration the idea of justice. In an effort to ensure fairness to all participants, all schools participating were offered the results upon completion of the study. These results were offered either electronically or through the form of a presentation where the researcher would come to report findings and offer professional development for ways to better meet the needs of this unique age group.

Reliability and Validity

According to Glanz (2003), validity is "the extent to which the instrument measures what it is intended to measure" (p. 64). For the administrator and teacher surveys, the researcher's intent was to measure to what extent middle school components were afforded and implemented in the school setting. McEwin and Greene's (2011) National Survey has been recognized as valid and reliable in measuring these components as it was utilized in their study. However, in this study the validity was dependent upon the participants' willingness to answer the survey with fidelity. If the surveys truly represented the sampling of the schools, the results were valid and therefore measured what they were intended to measure.

The PSES student survey has also been validated reliable for measuring student perceptions. This was done through the research Anderson-Butcher et al. (2012) collected on the implementation of the survey. Again, for the purpose of this study, it was imperative that the students answered the questions thoughtfully and accurately to

ensure valid and reliable results that conveyed their perceptions of their respective schools.

Limitations

This research method was limited by the participation of the teachers and students at the various schools. Participation being voluntary and anonymous was an essential factor in establishing an ethical study, but it was also a limiting factor in that some participants chose not to participate. If too many participants had not completed the survey, the results would not have been reflective of the school. It was also possible that without a sufficient return rate from the county, the data would not be able to be utilized within the results and conclusions.

Other limitations in this study included the size of the research population. Within the seven schools, there are almost 2,800 students. With this study depending on the perceptions of the student population, having enough valid responses to elicit reliable results proved to be a limitation.

Delimitations

The researcher chose to limit this study to one county and was dependent on the results from seven schools. In addition, the researcher limited the time frame of this study to one semester.

Research Design Rationale

This mixed-methods study was appropriate to the research questions of which grade-level configuration meets the social/emotional, cognitive, and physical developmental needs of young adolescents because it was a thorough examination of the programs offered, the rate of implementation, and student perceptions of their schools. If the schools were meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents, a relationship

was indicated through the positive perceptions of the students in that particular grade-level configuration. It was the belief that as more opportunities are offered that meet the social/emotional, cognitive, and physical needs of the young adolescents, the positive perceptions would also rise. The surveys asking for the programs offered and at what rate of fidelity answered the question about what grade-level configuration is best designed to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. Similar to McEwin and Greene's (2011) chart, the researcher also noted percentages of how the schools ranked the importance and implementation of specific programs and opportunities. In doing this, a particular grade-level configuration was identified as providing/implementing more opportunities appropriate to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents. This was further indicated true through the student perceptions also being higher for that particular grade-level configuration. By gathering student perceptual data, the researcher was able to determine if the programs being in place (or not) related with their attitudes of feeling safe and supported. Once there was a grade configuration that was deemed as being more effective in meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents, an additional variable of academic achievement was added to ascertain if meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents also aligned with that specific grade-level configuration producing students with higher academic achievement.

In addition to this quantitative data, the researcher was seeking triangulation by also gathering qualitative data in the form of the focus groups. The data collected within the conversations at each of the schools further supported the information collected through the surveys.

Overview and Appropriateness of the Methodology

Essentially, to gauge which grade configuration was meeting the developmental

needs of young adolescents most effectively, the researcher implemented three surveys. One survey was for the administration. It determined which opportunities and how often they were afforded to the students that met their social/emotional, cognitive, and physical developmental needs. The second survey was for the teachers to discern their dispositions on the level of significance and implementation of various middle school components in congruence with the students' social/emotional, cognitive, and physical developmental needs. The last survey was distributed to students to gather their perceptions of their school experience. By utilizing two instruments that have been shown to be valid and reliable, the researcher was able to find a relationship in the data.

The researcher hypothesized that the grade-level configurations that offer more developmentally appropriate opportunities will align with positive student perceptions and will accordingly link with higher academic achievement. It was also hypothesized that both grade-level configurations would not be able to offer the same amount of developmentally appropriate opportunities. In doing this, this study was able to ascertain what grade-level configuration was most appropriate for young adolescents.

Chapter 4: Results

Restatement of the Problem

Young adolescents have been taught in a multitude of grade-level configurations in an effort to meet societal needs or to increase student achievement. In doing this, the developmental needs of young adolescents have often been overlooked. While there is a prominence of traditional middle schools (6-8) in the United States, recently a movement to revert back to a K-8 model has gained momentum and is causing massive reform and controversy over which grade-level configuration best serves this unique age group. The purpose of the research study was to discover which grade-level configuration best meets the developmental needs of young adolescents, as student success is dependent on these needs being met. Developmental needs, defined in this study, include the social/ emotional, cognitive, and physical needs of young adolescents.

Four research questions were utilized to guide this study.

1. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the social/emotional needs of young adolescents?
2. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the physical needs of young adolescents?
3. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the cognitive needs of young adolescents?
4. What is the relationship between the constructs of developmental needs (social/emotional, physical, cognitive) and academic achievement?

In this chapter, the results of the mixed-methods study that was utilized are revealed and their implications discussed.

Participants

The schools that participated in this study were labeled alphabetically A-G. Schools A, B, C, and D all teach adolescents in a traditional 6-8 grade-level configuration. Schools E, F, and G all utilize a K-8 grade-level configuration. These schools are located in the same county in northwest North Carolina.

The researcher first conducted focus groups at each of the seven schools mentioned above. The participants of the focus groups were all middle level educators with an array of experience in various content areas and years of experience. Several of the educators had experience teaching at both K-8 and 6-8 grade-level configurations. The total number of participants for all seven focus groups was 39.

The size and demographics of the two types of grade-level configurations contrasted greatly. The three K-8 schools were all rural, "outlier" schools that were located on the edge of the county. There is very little racial and socioeconomic diversity at any of these three schools. They are also dramatically smaller than the 6-8 schools.

The 6-8 schools are all more centrally located within the county and are located in more urban/suburban areas. These schools have more diversity and are also much larger. The table below shows the size of each school and the total student population by grade-level configuration.

Table 7

Student Population by School/Grade-level Configuration

School	Grade Configuration	Total Number of Students in Grades 6-8
A	6-8	786
B	6-8	490
C	6-8	639
D	6-8	641
E	K-8	48
F	K-8	73
G	K-8	117
A-D (combined)	6-8	2,556
E-G (combined)	K-8	238 (in Grades 6-8)

There were three separate quantitative surveys utilized to gather data concerning how the different grade-level configurations were meeting young adolescents' developmental needs. The table below shows the return rate of each survey.

Table 8

Return Rate on Surveys

Survey	Total Number of Possible Participants	Total Number of Responses	Return Rate
Administrator	7	7	100%
Teacher	128	68	53%
Student	2,794	1,398	50%

Once the administrator and teacher surveys were returned, the questions were coded to determine whether they were answering Research Questions 1, 2, or 3 and then separated accordingly.

In this convergent mixed-methods approach, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered concurrently and then analyzed separately to determine if the findings proved or disproved one another. In reporting the findings, the researcher organized the data by research question and included both the qualitative and quantitative data.

Research Question 1

Qualitative data – 6-8. In regards to the first research question concerning the impact grade-level configuration had on the social and emotional needs of young adolescents, there were four themes that arose in every 6-8 focus group; opportunities, diversity, discipline, and limitations.

Opportunities. Teachers in Schools A-D were adamant that there were multiple opportunities available to their young adolescents that would meet their social and emotional needs. One of these opportunities included various clubs that meet after school. A teacher at School B mentioned that teachers willingly stay after school to provide clubs such as Science Olympiad, Beta Club, Gravity Games, Technology Club, and various others that she was sure existed but that she was not directly involved with. To further prove this point, a teacher at School D had to keep leaving the focus group to check on her yearbook club that was meeting after school during our focus group. While clubs are an opportunity for the students to meet socially and gather together outside of the restraints of the school day, some other opportunities included dances and the ability to make a multitude of friends. A teacher at School A mentioned that "Only at a 6-8 school like this can students have the opportunity to branch out socially." While the other teachers in the focus group were nodding, there was a charismatic discussion about how the students in a K-8 "only have a certain little group there and are raised together for nine years and it's all they know. Here you constantly have new students and I feel

like that social aspect in our world today is important."

Another opportunity that existed only at the 6-8 focus groups was the advisory program. All four of the 6-8 schools had advisory every day. Although advisory was used differently at each of them, they all felt that the program being embedded within their schedule was an opportunity they had to meet the students' social and emotional needs. School C specifically used their advisory to strategically offer service learning projects and frequently bring in guest speakers. The other schools often used their advisory time for remediation. The teachers from Schools A, B, and D mentioned that advisory time was not utilized well in their buildings. A teacher from School D even added, "Advisory, yes we added that this year and are getting rid of it next year." During the advisory discussion at School A, a teacher excused herself to locate an Advisory schedule that had been previously dispersed from the administration. She presented it to me and said, "This is the schedule we were supposed to use for advisory at the beginning of the year, but we don't go by it anymore." This was met with nods around the room as the other teachers agreed advisory is currently only used for tutoring and remediation. In looking at the original advisory schedule, there were days for silent reading time, academic clubs, and athletic intramurals. I asked a teacher from School C how they were able to keep advisory used for guest speakers, intramurals, and service learning projects. She responded that the guidance counselor coordinates all of the activities for everyone and disperses the lessons and activities to the classroom teachers.

Diversity. The discussion of diversity arose at Schools B and D explicitly, though the other two also mentioned themes of diversity within our discussions. At School B, one teacher stated, "The diversity here is definitely a challenge." Before I could ask a clarifying question, another teacher added, "But, it's a good thing because it

prepares them for life." The argument was that 6-8 schools offer a more diverse population that "is more like the real world they're going to encounter." Socially, the teachers found that the diversity offered at a large 6-8 school was advantageous for their students because it helped them to prepare not only for life but also for their more immediate future in entering high school. Two principals joined the focus groups; one at School E (who will be discussed more in the K-8 section) and one from School B. Both principals mentioned that they had been employed at the high school level and had experienced the phenomena of being able to categorize the freshman by which grade-level configuration they came from, simply by watching their social interactions. Though both principals had different hypotheses for this occurrence, the principal at School B felt like it was because they were so accustomed to the social diversity from being in a 6-8 school that the high school was not much of a change. The students arriving from the K-8 schools "went into culture shock when they arrived at the high school."

Another discussion pertaining to diversity dealt with the actual student population. The teachers from the 6-8 schools demographically had more racial diversity than the K-8 schools. When I asked for a potential cause, they explained that the middle schools are more centrally located in the county and the K-8 schools all happen to be on the outskirts of town, "in more rural areas." Generally, the communities that lived on the edges of the community are more demographically similar. In fact a teacher from School B mentioned that "The diversity is much richer here especially compared with [School G] which I think is a little 'clannish.'" A similar conversation came up at Schools A and C when they discussed how it was hard to keep up academically with the K-8 schools because they had so little diversity. A teacher from School A added, "I try not to compare because it really is apples to oranges. You can't compare our students with the

kids from the small schools."

Discipline. The theme of discipline arose in a couple of different capacities. First, the teachers at School C felt that there were fewer discipline issues and less bullying because the students come into the middle school setting "meek and mild." This specific teacher had experience in the K-8 setting as well and found that the students in K-8 were so comfortable with each other that they actually "took more liberties" than the students who entered a 6-8 "a little scared." Discipline was also mentioned with regards to resource support. The large 6-8 schools had full-time people to handle in-school suspensions in the event that they were needed. This is a luxury that is not afforded in the smaller schools, which will be addressed in a later section.

Community. The theme of community arose specifically at School D. This is one of the larger 6-8 schools and also the only school that when asked what grade-level configuration they preferred, did not choose the one in which they were currently working. At this school, one teacher discussed some of their hardships in reaching kids socially and emotionally and expressed, "The success of the students is about the community in which you live and the size of your school. We need a more involved and committed community here." Another teacher agreed and said, "We have a lack of parent support in this community." At School B, the theme of community arose again. This happens to be the smallest of the 6-8 schools and the one where the teacher previously expressed that they try to create a sense of community in their schools to promote success. He added, "The biggest difference is the community around the schools. I read an article once that said a sense of community is around 150 people or less." The teachers in the room nodded in consent that the community of the schools makes a difference in student success.

Limitations. All of the schools expressed limitations with regards to how they were unable to address young adolescents' developmental needs socially and emotionally. Kids not getting the attention they need due to their large population was the largest barrier mentioned by all four schools. A teacher from School D, who also taught in a K-8 setting, mentioned that now she "doesn't know the students as well." Another teacher in School C expressed a similar sentiment that "kids get lost in the shuffle." A teacher from School A labeled these students the "bubble kids" and mentioned that they can get overlooked. School B expressed that because they are aware this can happen, they have attempted to "block kids off for more of a community feel." Ironically, School B happens to be the smallest 6-8 school, and they are also the ones who have made more of an attempt to create a small community atmosphere.

Qualitative Data – K-8. Schools E, F, and G represent the K-8 schools that participated in the focus groups. Similar to the 6-8 schools, some themes were made apparent in regards to how they meet the social and emotional needs of their young adolescents. These themes can be categorized as atmosphere, discipline, community, transitions, and limitations. Although two of these themes are the same as the 6-8 schools, the information they provided contrasted greatly.

Atmosphere. All three of the K-8 schools first mentioned the small school atmosphere when asked how they were able to accommodate the social and emotional needs of their young adolescents. Simply put, the fact that there are so few of the students in their middle grades means that the students have closer relationships not only with each other but also with their teachers. The teachers mentioned that they did not have an advisory, but as a teacher from School E stated, "we don't need an advisory here because we are naturally their 'advisors' as well as their teachers." All the teachers at

each of the K-8 focus groups mentioned how comfortable the students were with their teachers and how strong the relationships were between the students and teachers. When asked why they felt a K-8 grade-level configuration was best for students socially and emotionally she responded with, "students are pushed to grow up so fast already, I prefer that we keep them in these small schools rather than push them into a large, departmentalized 6-8 before we have to. High school will be here soon enough."

Discipline. Several topics of conversation came up that could all be categorized as discipline related. Students in these K-8 schools "fight like brother and sister," according to a teacher from School E. They expressed that socially this can be a challenge because the students have grown up with each other. All three schools employ guidance counselors, two full-time and one half-time, who help with the social issues of the students being "too close." Other than this dynamic, the teachers felt that discipline was not of concern. None of the three K-8 schools employed a teacher for in-school suspensions or SRO officers and felt that there was no need for them. One teacher from School D claimed, "I learn more about my students and become closer to them when I have to deal with the discipline. I can usually get to the bottom of what's really going on opposed to a teacher that can just send them out."

Community. The theme of community surfaced as an advantage that the K-8 schools have over the 6-8 schools. It was already noted that School G was labeled as being "clannish" by a teacher in a 6-8 setting. When I visited School G and met the teachers, it was obvious what was meant by this statement. The teachers mentioned how well the community supported this school and how involved their parents were. At Schools E and F the community around them was also a topic of conversation. One of the teachers from School E mentioned that "Some parents send their kids here when they

have the option of a 6-8 school because they came through here and it's a matter of pride." She continued to discuss how the community is involved with their activities. The principal noted that sometimes the community being involved can be a challenge with regard to discipline because "the perception from the community is that you're playing favorites" when you do have to discipline students for fighting, "like brothers and sisters." She clarified that the parents are so involved with their students' lives in such a small community that often they have their own opinion about ways the principal disciplines and are more vocal about it than in a larger school.

Transitions. The theme of transitioning from a K-8 school to the high school arose multiple times in both the K-8 and 6-8 focus groups. Specifically, at School F, the teachers mentioned that there is a need for "a better partnership" with the high school to aid in transitioning the K-8 students in. The K-8 teachers felt that their grade configuration was more developmentally appropriate because students did not need to be transitioning to a large school at such a young age in sixth grade. However, they argued that since transitions were not made previously, they also needed more help with making that transition to the high school. A different teacher at School F added to this thought on transitions by saying, "I used to work at a psychiatric school with 5th through 12th graders and the majority of the students were 6th and 9th graders because they struggled with transitioning to a new school." The principal at School E mentioned that when she worked at the high school, many of the K-8 students still "stuck together" and were reserved about interacting with students from other schools. She said the 6-8 students did not have this problem. She also credited this difference to the fact that the K-8 students had not made previous transitions.

To further prove this point, transitioning the K-8 students was also brought up in

the 6-8 focus groups. The principal at School B mentioned that "K-8 schools' students didn't do as well in the high school. Both types of schools prepare the students well academically but the social transition is what makes the difference." In addition, at School C, a teacher mentioned that "our kids [6-8] transition better into high school because they come from larger schools. The K-8 students go into culture shock." Another teacher from School C added to this thought that there are "fewer dropouts from students who attended the 6-8 schools." This comment was met with consensus around the table as the teachers agreed that the K-8 students did not do as well in the high school.

At School C the theme of transitions was brought up again and along with the same argument that K-8 students do not transition well. A teacher mentioned that she also felt that "the 6th graders aren't coming ready to transition to the middle school either."

Limitations. Similar to the 6-8 schools, the K-8 schools also felt like they experienced some limitations with regard to meeting the social and emotional needs of their students. First, a teacher from School E felt like they had trouble teaching the kids "how to interact." Due to the small size of K-8 schools, there is a concern that the students go to the high school and do not do well socially interacting with the other students. This point was repeated by the principal from School E who mentioned that the students at the K-8 schools cluster together at the high school and are not as "socially mature" as the students who come from the 6-8 schools.

A summary of the findings in regards to Research Question 1 can be found in the table below.

Table 9

Summary of Qualitative Findings for Research Question 1

6-8	K-8
More opportunities for social interaction (clubs, larger dances, more students to interact with)	Small School atmosphere (conducive to closer relationships with teachers and other students)
More diversity that prepares students for the "real world"	No transition is easier on students (less social and emotional trauma)
Extra resources – programs such as Advisory, ISS teachers to handle discipline	Guidance Counselors
Limitations – students can potentially "fall through the cracks"	Limitations – students do not learn how to interact with diverse students before entering high school

The chart above highlights the discussions from both the 6-8 and K-8 focus groups. There are substantially more students at the 6-8 schools, and because of this, more opportunities are offered for social interaction as well as extra programs such as Advisory. Additionally, also due to the size of the schools, there is more diversity and students are more likely to "fall through the cracks." The K-8 schools have fewer students, resulting in a much different atmosphere where there are stronger relationships between students as well as teachers and students. They argue that not transitioning to a middle school at this delicate age is more developmentally appropriate but also realize that their students need more preparation in social interaction before attending the high school.

Quantitative Data – 6-8. Research Question 1 involving the social and emotional needs of young adolescents will now be looked at from a quantitative view.

The following table is a summation of the results found on the 6-8 surveys pertaining to this topic.

Table 10

Quantitative Findings in 6-8 for Research Question 1

Middle School Concept Component Related to Social and Emotional Needs of Young Adolescents	Level of Importance				Level of Implementation			
	VI	I	U	VU	HI	I	LI	NI
Advisory Programs	33%	49%	16%	2%	33%	40%	25%	2%
Educators who Value Working with Young Adolescents	85%	15%	0%	0%	40%	56%	4%	0%
Inviting, Supportive, Safe Environment	79%	21%	0%	0%	35%	52%	13%	0%
School Initiated Family and Community Partnerships	44%	48%	6%	2%	17%	40%	42%	0%
Trusting/Respective Relationships Among Admin, Teachers, Parents, Students	83%	15%	2%	0%	21%	60%	19%	0%

Note. VI: Very Important; I: Important; U: Unimportant; VU: Very unimportant; HI: Highly Implemented; I: Implemented; LI: Limited Implementation; NI: Not Implemented

In looking at the quantitative data collected concerning the social and emotional needs of young adolescents, it should first be noted that the middle school concept and particularly topics pertaining to meeting the social and emotional needs of young adolescents are greatly valued. However, the results also suggest that these concepts are not always implemented with fidelity. There are a few discrepancies in what the teachers think is very important and what is highly implemented. For an inviting, supportive, and safe environment, 100% of the teachers agree this is important. However, only 87% feel that this is implemented at their school. Another discrepancy is found in the category of trusting and respective relationships among the administrators, teachers, and parents. A

total of 98% of teachers think this is important, but only 81% find that it is sufficiently implemented. The largest deficit is found in the school initiated family and community partnerships. While 92% of teachers value this idea, only 58% feel that it is implemented, yielding a 34% difference.

Quantitative Data – K-8. The same surveys were given to middle school teachers in a K-8 setting. The following table shows their opinions related to how we are meeting the social and emotional needs of young adolescents.

Table 11

Quantitative Findings in K-8 for Research Question 1

Middle School Concept Component Related to Social and Emotional Needs of Young Adolescents in K-8	Level of Importance				Level of Implementation			
	VI	I	U	VU	HI	I	LI	NI
Advisory Programs	44%	31%	13%	13%	6%	25%	31%	37%
Educators who Value Working with Young Adolescents	81%	19%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Inviting, Supportive, Safe Environment	100%	0%	0%	0%	88%	13%	0%	0%
School Initiated Family and Community Partnerships	88%	13%	0%	0%	56%	38%	6%	0%
Trusting/Respective Relationships Among Admin, Teachers, Parents, Students	94%	6%	0%	0%	81%	13%	6%	0%

Note: VI: Very Important; I: Important; U: Unimportant; VU: Very unimportant; HI: Highly Implemented; I: Implemented; LI: Limited Implementation; NI: Not Implemented.

Overall, there were high percentages for what the teachers found important related to meeting the social and emotional needs of young adolescents. The only discrepancy of significance was Advisory. While 75% of the teachers felt that Advisory was important,

only 31% of teachers felt like it was implemented.

Next the two grade-level configurations are compared to each other. The next table shows the differences in teacher dispositions involving how much each concept related to meeting social and emotional needs is valued.

Table 12

Level of Importance Compared for K-8 and 6-8 for Research Question 1

Middle School Concept Component Related to Social and Emotional Needs of Young Adolescents	Level of Importance in 6-8 Schools				Level of Importance in K-8 Schools			
	HI	I	LI	NI	HI	I	LI	NI
Advisory Programs	33%	49%	16%	2%	44%	31%	13%	13%
Educators who Value Working with Young Adolescents	85%	15%	0%	0%	81%	19%	0%	0%
Inviting, Supportive, Safe Environment	79%	21%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
School Initiated Family and Community Partnerships	44%	48%	6%	2%	88%	13%	0%	0%
Trusting/Respective Relationships Among Admin, Teachers, Parents, Students	83%	15%	2%	0%	94%	6%	0%	0%

In evaluating the differences in teacher dispositions noted above, there are some significant findings. Overall, the 6-8 schools value the Advisory program more with an 82% versus the K-8 percentage of only 75. These numbers align with the focus group data that confirmed advisory is not utilized in the K-8 setting and thus not as valued. However, it should also be noted that 75% is still a relatively high number of teachers to find advisory important for it to not be utilized at all. The other difference in this data

arose with the component of school-initiated community partnerships. The K-8 schools had an overwhelming 100% agreement that this is important while the 6-8 schools were slightly lower with 92%. The rest of the numbers on the chart signify that middle school components related to meeting the social and emotional needs of young adolescents is valued with all of the educators teaching this age group, regardless of what grade-level configuration they work in.

Knowing that overall the educators value these components, the next chart shows the differences in how the two different grade-level configurations are implementing these various concepts related to meeting the social and emotional needs of young adolescents.

Table 13

Level of Implementation Compared for K-8 and 6-8 for Research Question 1

Middle School Concept Component Related to Social and Emotional Needs	Level of Implementation of the 6-8 Schools				Level of Implementation of the K-8 Schools			
	HI	I	LI	NI	HI	I	LI	NI
Advisory Programs	33%	40%	25%	2%	6%	25%	31%	38%
Educators who Value Working with Young Adolescents	40%	56%	4%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Inviting, Supportive, Safe Environment	35%	52%	13%	0%	88%	13%	0%	0%
School Initiated Family and Community Partnerships	17%	40%	42%	0%	56%	38%	6%	0%
Trusting/Respective Relationships Among Admin, Teachers, Parents, Students	21%	60%	19%	0%	81%	13%	6%	0%

In analyzing the chart comparing the implementation of middle school concepts

related to meeting the social and emotional needs of young adolescents, it should be noted that the K-8 schools had higher percentages of implementation in every category except Advisory. When adding the analysis of the administrator survey, the discrepancy in Advisory is explained. The 6-8 schools' principals all reported having Advisory daily for 21-30 minutes. The K-8 schools' principals all reported not having Advisory at all within their schedules. During the focus group discussions, the K-8 schools clarified that they did not feel that Advisory was a necessary component as they already establish a close relationship with their students by nature of having so few of them.

For the other four categories listed above, three of them have significant differences in K-8 and 6-8 implementations. In regards to an inviting, supportive, and safe atmosphere, the 6-8 schools reported only 87% implementation. In the same category, the K-8 schools reported 100% implementation of this type of atmosphere. When the schools were asked to assess their implementation of trusting and respective relationships among the faculty, parents, and students, the 6-8 schools reported 81% where the K-8 schools reported 94%. These results are further affirmed when consulting with the focus group data as the positive and close atmosphere and relationships among the K-8 students and staff were mentioned a multitude of times. To further prove this point, many of the 6-8 teachers in the focus groups noted that the school's large size impeded their ability to make more positive relationships and prevent students from "falling through the cracks."

The most significant difference shown in the table above is found in looking at the school-initiated family and community partnerships. A total of 58% of the 6-8 schools and 94% of the K-8 schools implement this concept yielding a substantial difference of 36%.

Conclusion for Research Question 1. In analyzing both the qualitative and quantitative data regarding meeting the social/emotional needs, it appears that the K-8 grade-level configuration is better able to meet this developmental need. According to the quantitative data, the K-8 schools were able to better implement every component except for Advisory in meeting the students' social and emotional needs. While not providing Advisory initially sounds concerning, the qualitative data gathered through the focus groups showed that the teachers at the small K-8 schools do not see a need to have Advisory. They naturally have a small community within their schools where the students and teachers are better able to build relationships thus meeting their social/emotional need to connect with an adult and have that advocate for them. Though the 6-8 schools have more opportunities for social interaction and diversity that the students may benefit from experiencing in high school, for the purposes of this study (not involving high schools success), the K-8 schools are not at a disadvantage at their current school by not having this opportunity. Overall, the surveys as well as the focus group data confirm that the K-8 grade-level configuration is better able to meet young adolescents' social/emotional needs.

Research Question 2

Qualitative Data – 6-8 and K-8. The second research question involved the school's ability to meet the physical needs of young adolescents. There was very little difference in the two different grade-level configurations. The themes arising from all seven schools concerned scheduling, resources, and teams.

Scheduling. The entire county scheduled physical education to be conducted in the schools for half of each year. Though the schools differ slightly in how they schedule this, essentially all the students are allotted P.E. for one semester. During this scheduled

P.E. time, health classes are also taught at each of the schools. Health is taught for the equivalent of 1 nine weeks at each of the schools and is within their scheduled P.E. time. A teacher at School E mentioned, "They have Health wherever the P.E. Coach can find an empty classroom." There was no marked difference in the opportunities for P.E. or health in one specific grade-level configuration.

Due to the scheduling restraints of the K-8 schools, there were no intramural sports teams. The 6-8 schools are able to offer intramurals during their advisory time. However, only one 6-8 school (School C) was using their advisory time to offer this opportunity for students. Even in this school, intramurals were only scheduled once a week. Also during their advisory time, School C has made an effort to bring in guest speakers from the health department and have mental health discussions on Fridays.

Resources. Both the K-8 and 6-8 schools felt that their resources were limited in regards to having a school nurse and/or faculty that were experts in the physical needs of young adolescents. Each of the schools has a part-time nurse who spends a few days a week (or less) at the schools and is available to students**.** A teacher in School D mentioned that "we have the highest health issues rate in our school [compared to the rest of the county]" and felt that a full time nurse was warranted in their building. Also in regards to resources, a teacher at School C felt that more training was needed for teachers as "kids are maturing faster than they used to." This was met with consensus around the table as teachers nodded and then told stories of students who were more physically mature.

Teams. The largest difference in the grade-level configurations involved their ability to offer sports teams to students. The 6-8 schools have the student population to accommodate a full team for every sport. This is a definite advantage to these students in

that every student has a team offered at their school that they can play on. The limitation to this number of students is that students also have to face being cut from the teams. A teacher from School A felt this was a positive aspect of being in a large school as "being cut is a part of life and makes these kids more resilient."

The K-8 schools are able to offer a few sports teams at the school level, such as volleyball, basketball, and cheerleading, where there is enough interest to fill a team. A teacher from School F noted that "every student that wants to play is able to make the team and no one gets cut." They felt this was a positive aspect of being in a small school because the students get the opportunity to learn about being on a team. The sports that the schools do not have enough participation in to create a whole team, such as football and baseball, are able to join up with a nearby 6-8 team "assuming they are not cut." This can also be advantageous for the students as they are socially interacting with students from the larger schools and are getting to know them before moving to the high school. The principal from School B mentioned that the students who participate in the district football and baseball teams "blend in" better at the high school than the K-8 students who did not participate in these activities.

The following chart is a summation of the findings in regards to Research Question 2.

Table 14

Summary of Qualitative Findings for Research Question 2

6-8	K-8
Offer P.E. for half the year	Offer P.E. for half the year
Able to offer intramurals within the schedule (during advisory)	Intramurals does not fit within the current schedule
Have own sports teams at each school	Have to combine with other schools to make complete teams for certain sports
Part-time nurse	Part-time nurse

As shown in the chart above, the advantage the 6-8 schools have is they are able to construct their own sports teams because they have more students. In addition, some of the 6-8 schools are able to offer intramurals periodically by utilizing their advisory time that the K-8 schools do not have within their schedules. The K-8 teachers felt they were not at a direct disadvantage by not being able to offer a sports team for every sport. They said the students who wanted to play were offered opportunities to play at the 6-8 schools if they were unable to find enough participation at their school to warrant a whole team. Additionally, when they were able to form their own teams, they did not have to cut students from the teams. They also felt this was an advantage because it was easier on the students' self-concept than being in a large middle school where students had to be cut from teams frequently.

Quantitative Data – 6-8. Research Question 2 involved the schools' abilities to meet the physical needs of young adolescents. The following chart is a summation of these findings for the 6-8 grade-level configuration.

Table 15

Quantitative Findings for 6-8 for Research Question 2

Middle School Concept Component Related to Physical Needs of Young Adolescents- 6-8	Level of Importance				Level of Implementation			
	VI	I	U	VU	HI	I	LI	NI
School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety	55%	38%	8%	0%	35%	48%	17%	0%

In evaluating the above results, it is again apparent that the majority of the 6-8 teachers value the concept of fostering health and wellness. However, implementation is more difficult. While 92.16% believe that this is important, only 82.69% feel like it is implemented well in their setting.

Quantitative Data – K-8. The following table shows the K-8 teachers' dispositions regarding their efforts to meet the physical needs of young adolescents.

Table 16

Quantitative Findings for K-8 for Research Question 2

Middle School Concept Component Related to Physical Needs of Young Adolescents for K-8	Level of Importance				Level of Implementation			
	VI	I	U	VU	HI	I	LI	NI
School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety	100%	0%	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%

An analysis of the data from the K-8 schools shows that 100% of the teachers in that setting think that fostering health, wellness, and safety is very important. In addition to this, the same percentage felt they were able to implement this concept. Though both

the K-8 and 6-8 grade-level configurations felt that fostering health and wellness among the students was important, the K-8 schools have a higher percentage of implementation by 17%.

To also assess how well each grade-level configuration is meeting the physical needs of young adolescents, the administrators were asked questions regarding their school's interscholastic and intramural opportunities. The results are summarized in the table below.

Table 17

Interscholastic and Intramural Sports Options for 6-8 and K-8

Grade-Level Configuration	Interscholastic Sports Only	Interscholastic and Intramural Sports
6-8	1	3
K-8	2	1

In looking at the table above and comparing it to the focus group data, the 6-8 schools having more opportunities for intramural sports could be credited to their schedule allowing for Advisory. Two separate 6-8 focus groups explained that intramurals were offered within their Advisory time. This may explain also why it appears to be more difficult to offer it in the K-8 setting, as they do not have Advisory built into their schedules.

In addition to the questions about sports, the administrators were also asked about the occurrence of Health, Sex Education, and Physical Education opportunities in their schools. Every administrator in both grade-level configurations responded that their students were offered these courses. Upon analyzing the data concerning which grade-

level configuration was best meeting their students' physical needs, there were no significant differences warranting K-8 or 6-8 better.

Conclusion for Research Question 2. No conclusion can be drawn for which grade-level configuration is better able to meet young adolescents' physical needs. While the quantitative data showed that the K-8 schools have a higher implementation of fostering health, the administration surveys also showed that the 6-8 schools have more opportunities for intramural sports. In looking at the qualitative data, the 6-8 schools appeared to have an advantage with having the ability to create their own sports teams at the school level; however, it was also pointed out that many of those students have to endure try outs and being cut due to the large number of participants. Additionally, the K-8 schools that can create a sports team with enough participation do not have to eliminate students as everyone that wants to play is allowed. If there is not enough participation at the K-8 school, the students are still given the opportunity to participate at the neighboring 6-8 school. Due to the mixed results in advantages and disadvantages to both grade-level configurations, a solid conclusion about which one better meets the physical needs of young adolescents could not be made.

Research Question 3

Qualitative Data – 6-8 and K-8. The third research question refers to meeting young adolescents' cognitive needs. In discussing this topic in the focus groups, it became apparent that the grade-level configurations differ significantly in how they each meet this developmental need. Three themes will be discussed: electives, core classes, and student success.

Electives. In the 6-8 school, there are many electives that serve to meet young adolescents' cognitive needs. According to a teacher at School A, they offer band,

chorus, foreign language, Project Lead the Way (a STEM funded grant that supports hands-on science and math projects), art, and three computer classes that all teach different curriculums. She was unsure if she named them all but thought there could be more. Contrasting this multitude of options are the K-8 schools. Their list of electives succinctly includes band, media, Project Lead the Way, and guidance. They are able to offer Spanish with an online program, but do not currently have any students utilizing this option. While the students at the 6-8 school choose which elective to enroll in and then alternate, the students at the K-8 schools are offered each class once a week. The principal at School F said that "Enrichments run the schedule because we share enrichment teachers with other schools." At the 6-8 schools, a teacher from School D confirmed that "all of our encore teachers are full time." The result of these course offerings and schedules is that the students at the 6-8 schools are able to have more elective options and for a longer amount of time. This also results in the 6-8 schools having less instructional time for their core classes which is discussed below.

Core classes. There are some notable differences concerning how the two different grade-level configurations run their core classes. The 6-8 schools are mostly departmentalized where every teacher is in charge of one content area. There were a couple of exceptions where Language Arts teachers also integrated Social Studies. These blocks were 60-65 minutes each at three of the 6-8 schools. Additionally, the AIG (academically and intellectually gifted) students were separated at Schools A, C, and D. They have their own ELA and Math I classes that they attend together. In addition, there are also several courses offered for students who would like to obtain high school credits. Two examples are World History and Spanish. Because they are grouped for these advanced classes, they naturally end up leveled in the other core classes.

The K-8 schools have a slightly different approach to how they deliver their core classes to students. The teachers are responsible for delivering two or more curriculums depending on the school. Most teachers focus on one subject but teach multiple grades (for example, Math for sixth, seventh, and eighth grades). Additionally, the blocks at all three K-8 schools were 90 minutes each. The students are grouped heterogeneously and there are no special classes for advanced or at-risk students. The students who do qualify for advanced classes such as Math I are offered those courses online. The AIG teacher practices inclusion and serves those students within their regular classroom. The K-8 teachers noted that because many of them teach either multiple subjects and/or multiple grades, vertical and horizontal alignment of curriculums happens naturally to the benefit of the students.

Student success. In regards to student success, the 6-8 schools admitted their concern that "some students will fall through the cracks." They have attempted to alleviate this problem by offering remediation courses that may help some students before they get too far behind academically. They are able to do this by using their advisory time for remediation. A teacher at School A still felt like they were in desperate need of some additional tutoring for their students. A teacher from School B added to a similar thought by stating that "differentiation is difficult with 90 students."

Opposing this view is the K-8 grade-level configuration. Teachers felt that the relationships they experienced with their students added to their academic success; as a teacher from School E noted, "We won't let them fall through the cracks." Additionally, with such small numbers, all the teachers in the focus group agreed they were able to differentiate their instruction to accommodate the students' needs. As mentioned previously, their ability to align their curriculums vertically and horizontally is a major

advantage to this setting. The principal from School F noted that her teachers also get more planning time because they have fewer meetings. She stated that the 6-8 schools need to meet as grade-levels, by content area, and at times with other grade-levels for vertical alignment. These various groupings for meetings can involve 20 or more teachers in the 6-8 schools. At the K-8 schools, they can gather all of the middle school staff together and have a total of six people. They can efficiently discuss grade-level and content area and do not typically need to address vertical alignment because many of the teachers teach the same students for 3 years.

The table below is a summation of the findings related to Research Question 3.

Table 18

Summary of Qualitative Findings for Research Question 3

6-8	K-8
Multiple elective options for students	Limited elective options
Average of 60 minute blocks	Average of 90 minute blocks
Scheduling is flexible	Scheduling revolves around availability of encore teachers
Departmentalized by grade	Departmentalized by content
Differentiation is difficult with so many students	Differentiation is easier with fewer students
Kids more easily “fall through cracks”	Kids rarely “fall through cracks”
Students are grouped by ability	Students are heterogeneously grouped
Able to offer remediation and advanced courses	Students are offered advanced courses online and served within regular classroom
Vertical alignment more difficult with so many teachers	Vertical alignment happens naturally

In looking at the above chart, there are obvious advantages to both grade-level configurations. While the 6-8 schools are able to offer more elective options and provide classes on campus for advanced students, they also have so many students that some admittedly "get lost in the shuffle." The K-8 schools have more limited elective options but are able to have longer core classes and ensure that no students "fall through the cracks."

Quantitative Data – 6-8. Research Question 3 pertained to meeting the cognitive needs of young adolescents. The chart below displays the quantitative findings from the 6-8 schools.

Table 19

Quantitative Findings in 6-8 for Research Question 3

Middle School Concept Component Related to Cognitive Needs for 6-8	Level of Importance				Level of Implementation			
	VI	I	U	VU	HI	I	LI	NI
Interdisciplinary Team Organization	57%	40%	3%	0%	34%	50%	16%	0%
Flexible Scheduling and Grouping	56%	43%	1%	0%	28%	55%	16%	0%
Strong Focus on Basic Subjects	72%	28%	0%	0%	60%	38%	1%	0%
Teachers and Students Engaged in Active Learning	81%	18%	1%	0%	47%	49%	4%	0%
Curriculum that is Relevant, Challenging, Integrative & Exploratory	84%	16%	0%	0%	41%	53%	6%	0%
Multiple Teaching and Learning Approaches	74%	26%	0%	0%	51%	44%	4%	0%
Teachers with Middle School/Level Teacher Certification/Licensure	60%	40%	0%	0%	72%	24%	4%	0%
Evidence-Based Decision Making	54%	43%	3%	0%	38%	47%	15%	0%
Assessment and Evaluation Programs that Promote Quality Learning	60%	34%	6%	0%	46%	40%	15%	0%

In evaluating the above results, it should be noted that the middle school concept, particularly pertaining to what is best for young adolescents' cognitive development, is greatly valued; however, again the implementation of these concepts is lower in every category. In only two categories were the differences substantial. For interdisciplinary teaming, 97% of the teachers claimed it was important, but only 84% of the teachers felt it was implemented. For flexible scheduling and grouping, again 99% of teachers felt this was important, but only 84% felt that it was implemented. These data align with the information found in the focus groups where the 6-8 teachers noted that they were departmentalized and often the students were grouped for AIG or EC. Though this seemed to be the preference throughout the staff I spoke with, it does not coincide with the middle school concept.

Quantitative Data – K-8. The following table displays the data collected from the K-8 teachers in regards to how they are able to meet the cognitive needs of young adolescents.

Table 20

Quantitative Findings in K-8 for Research Question 3

Middle School Concept Component Related to Cognitive Needs for K-8	Level of Importance				Level of Implementation			
	VI	I	U	VU	HI	I	LI	NI
Interdisciplinary Team Organization	31%	63%	6%	0%	19%	50%	31%	0%
Flexible Scheduling and Grouping	69%	31%	0%	0%	44%	56%	0%	0%
Strong Focus on Basic Subjects	88%	13%	0%	0%	88%	13%	0%	0%
Teachers and Students Engaged in Active Learning	88%	13%	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
Curriculum that is Relevant, Challenging, Integrative & Exploratory	100%	0%	0%	0%	63%	38%	0%	0%
Multiple Teaching and Learning Approaches	75%	25%	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
Teachers with Middle School/Level Teacher Certification/Licensure	75%	25%	0%	0%	81%	19%	0%	0%
Evidence-Based Decision Making	63%	38%	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
Assessment and Evaluation Programs that Promote Quality Learning	81%	19%	0%	0%	81%	19%	0%	0%

In analyzing the above table, there is only one category that has a significant discrepancy in how much it's valued and how well it's implemented. Interdisciplinary team organization had a 94% importance rate but only a 69 implementation rate. This difference of 25% is significant especially when considering every other component on the chart had 100% important and implemented. When comparing these data with the focus groups, these data align with the groups who mentioned that they had to teach multiple grades rather than multiple subjects. Since the K-8 schools also happened to have fewer students, the teachers mentioned that their teams could change from year to

year depending on the size of the group coming up.

In an effort to see what grade-level configuration values the components related to cognitive needs more, the next table compares the separate grade-level configurations.

Table 21

Differences in K-8 and 6-8 Importance for Research Question 3

Middle School Concept Component Related to Cognitive Needs for both K-8 and 6-8 Schools	Level of Importance- 6-8				Level of Importance- K-8			
	VI	I	U	VU	HI	I	LI	NI
Interdisciplinary Team Organization	57%	40%	3%	0%	31%	63%	6%	0%
Flexible Scheduling and Grouping	56%	43%	1%	0%	69%	31%	0%	0%
Strong Focus on Basic Subjects	72%	28%	%	0%	88%	13%	0%	0%
Teachers and Students Engaged in Active Learning	81%	18%	1%	0%	88%	13%	0%	0%
Curriculum that is Relevant, Challenging, Integrative & Exploratory	84%	16%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Multiple Teaching and Learning Approaches	74%	26%	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
Teachers with Middle School/Level Teacher Certification/Licensure	60%	40%	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
Evidence-Based Decision Making	54%	43%	3%	0%	63%	38%	0%	0%
Assessment and Evaluation Programs that Promote Quality Learning	60%	34%	6%	0%	81%	19%	0%	0%

It is apparent in the above chart that regardless of grade span configuration, both types of schools value components related to meeting the cognitive needs of young adolescents. There were few discrepancies in the percentages; however, the few differences were mostly in favor of the K-8 schools. Overall, they had a higher

percentage in the categories of evidence-based decision making, assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning, teachers and students engaged in active learning, and flexible scheduling and grouping. Interdisciplinary teaming was the only category where the 6-8 teachers had a higher percentage of valuing its importance than the K-8 schools. Though the difference is only 3%, this outlier where the 6-8 had a higher percentage of valuing a component over the K-8 is worth noting.

The next table compares the implementation of middle school concepts related to cognitive needs with both grade-level configurations. This will help assess whether K-8 or 6-8 is better able to implement these components.

Table 22

Differences in K-8 and 6-8 Implementations for Research Question 3

Middle School Concept Component Related to Cognitive Needs for K-8 and 6-8	Level of Implementation for 6-8				Level of Implementation for K-8			
	HI	I	LI	NI	HI	I	LI	NI
Interdisciplinary Team Organization	34%	50%	16%	0%	19%	50%	31%	0%
Flexible Scheduling and Grouping	28%	55%	16%	0%	44%	56%	0%	0%
Strong Focus on Basic Subjects	60%	38%	1%	0%	87%	13%	0%	0%
Teachers and Students Engaged in Active Learning	47%	49%	4%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
Curriculum that is Relevant, Challenging, Integrative & Exploratory	41%	53%	6%	0%	63%	38%	0%	0%
Multiple Teaching and Learning Approaches	51%	44%	4%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
Teachers with Middle School/Level Teacher Certification/Licensure	72%	24%	4%	0%	81%	19%	0%	0%
Evidence-Based Decision Making	38%	47%	15%	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
Assessment and Evaluation Programs that Promote Quality Learning	46%	40%	15%	0%	81%	19%	0%	0%

The table comparing the K-8 and 6-8 implementation of concepts related to cognitive development shows that the K-8 schools are overall better able to implement these middle school concepts. In particular, there are four categories where there was a significant difference in implementation. The first is interdisciplinary team organization. Though it was noted above that both grade-level configurations are unable to implement it at the same rate at which they value it, this was the only category in which 6-8 had a higher rate of implementation with an 84% versus the K-8 with 69%.

The other three categories that showed significant differences were flexible scheduling and grouping, evidence-based decision making, and assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning. With all three of these concepts, the K-8 schools had higher rates of implementation.

The administrator survey also had questions pertaining to how their schools were meeting young adolescents' cognitive needs. These questions revolved around what classes were offered and at what frequency. All core subjects – math, language arts, social studies, and science, were taught at each school. For the K-8 grade-level configurations, two schools had math and language arts at 90 minutes per day. The other K-8 school offered math and language arts for 60 minutes per day. All three of the K-8 schools averaged social studies and science for 45 minutes per day.

The 6-8 schools also offered all core subjects every day. Three of four of the 6-8 schools offered all four subjects for 60 minutes daily. The last school was able to offer math and language arts for 75 minutes and social studies and science for 45 minutes. None of the classes were offered for 90 minutes except in eighth grade. One 6-8 school was able to offer all four subjects at 90 minutes per day. The other three schools kept their eighth grades at 60 minutes blocks.

The following table is a summation of what encore classes are offered at each type of school. The numbers in parentheses represent how many of the schools offer that specific encore.

Table 23

Encore Classes Offered at Both K-8 and 6-8

6-8 Encore Classes	K-8 Encore Classes
Art (4/4)	Art (2/3)
Band (4/4)	Band (3/3)
Career Education (1/4)	Career Education (1/3)
Chorus (4/4)	Chorus (2/3)
Computers (4/4)	Computers (1/3)
Reading (1/4)	Reading (1/3)
Foreign Language (4/4)	
Word Processing (1/4)	

In comparing the encore offerings at each type of grade configuration, it is apparent that the 6-8 schools offer more opportunities to students. This aligns with the focus group discussions regarding encore classes as well. The focus group participants were able to name more classes that are not listed on this chart due to the limitation of the survey having pregenerated options and nowhere to add additional classes.

The administrators were then asked about instructional grouping. Of the 6-8 grade-level configurations, three schools stated that they track students by ability at all grade levels but only for certain subjects. School D said that it was restricted to a certain grade level and subject and was not used everywhere else. Of the K-8 grade-level configurations, one school stated that ability grouping was used in all basic subjects. The other two schools claimed to use ability grouping at certain grades for specific classes and did not utilize it everywhere.

The last question on the administrator survey focused on interdisciplinary teaming. All three K-8 schools said they did not practice interdisciplinary teaming. All four of the 6-8 schools claimed they did practice interdisciplinary teaming. This aligns

with the teacher surveys where 6-8 had a higher rate of implementation than K-8 in this area. It also reinforces what the teachers discussed in the focus groups.

Conclusion for Research Question 3. In combining the qualitative and quantitative data regarding the cognitive needs of young adolescents, the K-8 schools again appear to be better able to meet this developmental need. The teacher surveys showed the K-8 schools were better able to implement every component related to meeting cognitive needs with the exception of interdisciplinary teaming. The qualitative data gave the rationale behind this in explaining that the small numbers at the K-8 schools prevent the teachers from being able to team in that manner. However, it is also the small environment and close relationships between teachers and students that allow the K-8 schools to meet the cognitive needs of their students. Though the teachers are not able to create interdisciplinary teams, they have so few teachers in the middle grades that they are better able to make connections for students horizontally as well as vertically. The 6-8 schools are still able to offer more elective options, though this advantage does not seem to outweigh the fact that the K-8 schools were better able to implement so many components related to the students' cognitive needs. In conclusion, the K-8 schools are better able to meet young adolescents' cognitive needs.

Student Perception Surveys

The students were given a 16-question perception survey to assess their attitudes about school. The researcher was hoping to find a relationship between a grade-level configuration that was better able to meet students' needs and higher student perceptions. The survey asked students questions utilizing a Likert scale with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. The researcher then added the 4s and 5s together for each question and found an average positive perception per grade-level configuration. The results are

below.

Table 24

Average of Students with Positive Perceptions for Both K-8 and 6-8

Grade-Level Configuration	Average of Students with Positive Perceptions
6-8	65%
K-8	73%

As shown in the table above, the K-8 students had an overall higher positive perception than the students in the 6-8 schools. It should also be noted that the majority of the surveys came from 6-8 schools. Since there are so many more students in a 6-8 grade-level configuration than in a K-8 school, the majority of the results represent students in a 6-8 school setting. The chart below displays the number of surveys returned from each grade-level configuration.

Table 25

Return Rate of Student Surveys per Grade-Level Configuration

Grade-Level Configuration	Total Number of Students	Number of Surveys Completed	Return Rate
6-8	2,556	1,212	47%
K-8	238	180	76%

In analyzing the student perceptions more in depth, the following tables show the two grade-level configurations and how each responded to the 16 questions regarding their school experiences.

Table 26

Student Perception 6-8 Responses

Student Perception Question- 6-8 Responses	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers provide helpful feedback to students about their academic performance.	2.75%	7.49%	24.48%	34.22%	31.06%
Decisions at my school always focus on what is best for learning.	3.26%	9.36%	25.31%	32.16%	29.91%
My teachers monitor whether students are learning on a regular basis.	3.94%	9.46%	23.28%	29.98%	33.33%
My school values students' learning.	3.46%	3.21%	16.89%	27.36%	49.07%
There are teachers at my school I can go to for help if I need it.	3.77%	6.45%	11.06%	20.37%	58.34%
There are other school staff at my school I can go to for help if I need it.	5.37%	8.40%	16.04%	27.37%	42.82%
I am confident in my ability to manage my school work.	2.69%	6.13%	17.46%	31.99%	41.73%
I feel my school experience is preparing me well for adulthood.	4.95%	9.82%	19.48%	29.97%	35.77%
I have enjoyed my school experience so far.	8.91%	10.00%	20.59%	28.74%	31.76%
I like the challenges of learning new things at school.	7.48%	12.52%	22.27%	28.15%	29.58%
I have a positive attitude toward school.	8.33%	10.86%	23.82%	29.63%	27.36%
I feel I have made the most of my school experience so far.	5.04%	10.42%	21.18%	33.11%	30.25%
I am proud to be a student at my school.	8.13%	7.12%	17.52%	18.52%	48.70%
I feel like I belong to my school.	10.59%	10.67%	16.81%	22.61%	39.33%
I enjoy coming to my school.	14.57%	11.54%	21.74%	22.49%	29.65%
I have meaningful relationships with teachers at my school.	9.46%	12.38%	21.59%	27.78%	28.79%

When adding the 4s and 5s in the chart to ascertain the total positive perception, there was an average of 65%. The highest perception rate is found when the students

respond to the statement, “There are teachers at my school I can go to for help if I need it.” This statement averaged 78.71%. This shows that even though the 6-8 teachers were concerned that “students get lost in the shuffle,” in actuality, the vast majority of students feel close enough to a teacher that they would go to one if they needed help.

In contrast, the lowest rating was found in the statement “I enjoy coming to school” with an average of 52.14%. Though more probing with students would be needed to find the rationale behind why the students do not enjoy coming to school, it can be assumed that at least one factor could be related to their adolescence and unique attitudes during this time.

The next table shows the K-8 students’ responses to the same questions.

Table 27

Student Perception K-8 Responses

Student Perception Question-K-8 Responses	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers provide helpful feedback to students about their academic performance.	5.65%	2.26%	9.60%	37.85%	44.63%
Decisions at my school always focus on what is best for learning.	5.08%	6.78%	14.69%	33.90%	39.55%
My teachers monitor whether students are learning on a regular basis.	3.98%	5.11%	12.50%	26.14%	52.27%
My school values students' learning.	5.11%	3.41%	6.25%	17.61%	67.61%
There are teachers at my school I can go to for help if I need it.	5.11%	1.70%	5.68%	14.77%	72.73%
There are other school staff at my school I can go to for help if I need it.	6.29%	6.29%	10.86%	21.14%	55.43%
I am confident in my ability to manage my school work.	3.95%	4.52%	10.17%	35.03%	46.33%
I feel my school experience is preparing me well for adulthood.	6.21%	5.65%	12.99%	32.20%	42.94%
I have enjoyed my school experience so far.	12.00%	6.86%	19.43%	22.86%	38.86%
I like the challenges of learning new things at school.	8.52%	9.66%	13.64%	28.98%	39.20%
I have a positive attitude toward school.	10.29%	10.29%	17.14%	26.29%	36.00%
I feel I have made the most of my school experience so far.	4.62%	10.40%	12.72%	30.64%	41.62%
I am proud to be a student at my school.	9.77%	4.02%	13.22%	13.22%	59.77%
I feel like I belong to my school.	14.20%	5.68%	11.36%	14.77%	53.98%
I enjoy coming to my school.	17.61%	9.09%	14.77%	20.45%	38.07%
I have meaningful relationships with teachers at my school.	6.21%	7.91%	14.69%	21.47%	49.72%

When adding the 4s and 5s in this chart, the average positive perception is 73%. In congruence with the 6-8 students, the highest perceptions are found with the statement,

"There are teachers at my school I can go to for help if I need it." The average for this statement was 87.5%. This again speaks highly of the teachers' abilities to develop close relationships with their students and create an environment where the students feel comfortable talking to adults. Although this statement was the highest with both the K-8 and the 6-8 students, the K-8 students' positive perception was 8.79% higher than the 6-8 students.

The lowest positive perception score was 58.52% with the statement, "I enjoy coming to my school." Again this is in congruence with the 6-8 students' perceptions who also ranked this the lowest on their surveys. Again the K-8 students ranked this higher by 5.98%.

Table 28

Positive Student Perceptions- 6-8 and K-8

Student Perception Question	6-8 Positive Perceptions (4-5)	K-8 Positive Perceptions (4-5)
My teachers provide helpful feedback to students about their academic performance.	65.28%	82.48%
Decisions at my school always focus on what is best for learning.	62.07%	73.45%
My teachers monitor whether students are learning on a regular basis.	63.31%	78.41%
My school values students' learning.	76.43%	85.22%
There are teachers at my school I can go to for help if I need it.	78.71%	87.5%
There are other school staff at my school I can go to for help if I need it.	70.19%	76.57%
I am confident in my ability to manage my school work.	73.72%	81.36%
I feel my school experience is preparing me well for adulthood.	65.74%	75.14%
I have enjoyed my school experience so far.	60.50%	61.72%
I like the challenges of learning new things at school.	57.73%	68.18%
I have a positive attitude toward school.	56.99%	62.29%
I feel I have made the most of my school experience so far.	63.36%	62.29%
I am proud to be a student at my school.	67.22%	72.99%
I feel like I belong to my school.	61.94%	68.75%
I enjoy coming to my school.	52.14%	58.52%
I have meaningful relationships with teachers at my school.	56.57%	71.19%

The table above shows both the 6-8 and K-8 students' positive perceptions as

determined by adding the level 4s and 5s together. This table shows that the K-8 schools had a higher percentage of positive perception for all statements except one. The statement, "I feel I have made the most of my school experience so far," was lower for the K-8 students by 1.07%. Though this is not a significant difference, being the only statement where the 6-8 students are more positive is worth noting.

Some substantial differences were found in three other statements. Pertaining to whether students receive helpful feedback, the K-8 students responded 17.2% higher than the 6-8 students. Another example would be when the students were asked if their teachers were able to monitor their learning regularly. With this statement, again the K-8 students responded 15.1% higher than the 6-8 students. The last example was about developing meaningful relationships with their teachers. The K-8 students had a 14.62% higher percentage than the 6-8 students. All three of these examples could potentially be related to size as the 6-8 teachers in the focus groups also showed similar concerns with having so many students that it was more difficult to provide differentiation and ensure that each student was receiving the attention they needed. In a smaller setting with fewer students, it would be easier to create meaningful relationships and provide regular, helpful feedback to students.

The overall results showing that the K-8 students have a higher perception of their school experience align with Research Questions 1 and 3 that also found that the K-8 schools were better able to meet the students' social/emotional and cognitive needs. Research Question 2 was inconclusive, and thus a relationship could not be made in meeting students' physical needs and higher student perceptions.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 inquired about the relationship in meeting developmental

needs and academic achievement. In determining the answer to this question, the researcher first determined that based on the data collected, the K-8 grade-level configurations proved to be meeting developmental needs better than 6-8 schools with higher rates of implementing components related to young adolescents' social/emotional, physical, and cognitive needs. Next, the researcher analyzed the academic achievement of each school as found on NC School Report Cards (Education First NC School Report Cards, 2013). The following table shows the results.

Table 29

Schools' Academic Achievement for Research Question 4

School/Grade-Level Configuration	Percent of students who scored on or above grade level on 2013 Reading EOG	Percent of students who scored on or above grade level 2013 Math EOG
School A (6-8)	46%	35%
School B (6-8)	42%	35%
School C (6-8)	47%	45%
School D (6-8)	33%	22%
School E (K-8)	51%	26%
School F (K-8)	43%	22%
School G (K-8)	60%	38%

In looking at this data, there is no obvious relationship between grade-level configuration and student performance. The highest reading scores came from a K-8 school, and the highest math scores came from a 6-8 school. In an effort to find a trend, the researcher averaged the K-8 scores together and the 6-8 scores together to develop the table below.

Table 30

Average EOG Scores by Grade-Level Configuration

Grade-Level Configuration	Average Reading EOG	Average Math EOG
6-8	42%	34%
K-8	51%	29%

This table shows that the K-8 schools outperformed the 6-8 schools on the Reading EOG by 9%. It also shows that the 6-8 schools outperformed the K-8 schools on the Math EOG by 5%. Again, there is no discernable difference in academic achievement for the two different grade-level configurations. Therefore, it is difficult to determine what the relationship is between the constructs of meeting developmental needs and academic achievement.

Triangulation of Data

In analyzing the data collected through the focus groups and surveys, it becomes apparent that they align well with each other. While the teacher surveys were able to give numbers to compare the schools with, the focus groups were able to give reasons behind the numbers. The student perception surveys added another layer of evidence to justify the teacher surveys which ultimately all aligned in determining the K-8 grade-level configuration does a more effective job of meeting young adolescents' social/emotional and cognitive needs.

Overall, the teacher surveys demonstrated that components related to the social/emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of young adolescents were more highly valued and implemented in the K-8 grade-level configuration. The student surveys also

aligned with the K-8 students having a more positive perception of their school experience than the students in the 6-8 setting. There proved to be a relationship between providing opportunities that meet the developmental needs of young adolescents and higher student perceptions.

For this study, a correlating relationship could not be found between meeting developmental needs and higher academic achievement. While educators and experts will agree that students perform better when their needs are being met, there was not a significant enough difference in the academic achievement of the schools studied to claim a correlating relationship between the two components.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings associated with this mixed-methods study in an attempt to discover what grade-level configuration best meets young adolescents' developmental needs.

First, the qualitative data gathered through focus groups at seven schools with 39 participants were discussed. The findings were reported by research question. Next, the quantitative data collected through 75 administrator and teacher surveys were evaluated and also reported by research question. Finally, the 1,398 student perception surveys were averaged and reported. The following explains the findings per research question.

For Research Question 1 pertaining to meeting young adolescents' social and emotional needs, the researcher discovered through the focus groups that the opportunities to do this at each grade-level configuration were different. While 6-8 schools offered classes such as advisory, the K-8 schools claimed to not need this option due to the close atmosphere and personal relationships they naturally have with their students being in such small schools. This aligned with the quantitative data gathered

through the surveys that showed that even though advisory was not offered at the K-8 setting, the K-8 schools had a higher rate of implementation in all the other components of meeting young adolescents' social and emotional needs. Overall, it was determined that the K-8 grade-level configuration is better able to meet students' social and emotional needs.

For Research Question 2 regarding the physical needs of young adolescents, there was not a substantial difference in how each grade-level configuration addressed this need. One noted difference is that not all of the K-8 schools have the student population to justify having their own sports teams. In addition, the 6-8 schools have more opportunities to offer intramurals within the school day through the use of their advisory programs. This also aligned with the quantitative data gathered from the teachers and administration that reported the K-8 schools had a higher implementation of fostering health and wellness, though the 6-8 schools had more opportunities for athletics. With mixed results like these, it was not determined that one grade-level configuration did a better job of meeting young adolescents' physical needs over the other.

For Research Question 3 involving the cognitive needs of young adolescents, the researcher found that there were several differences in the way the two different grade-level configurations attempted to meet these needs. While all core subjects are offered at each school, the K-8 schools average longer class times. They also do not group kids for certain subjects as their population is more limited. The 6-8 schools group students by ability and offer more classes at the school such as Math I and World History because they have enough students to warrant a teacher for those subjects. Additionally, the encore classes differ. The K-8 schools share encore teachers with the other K-8 schools and are more limited on what classes they can offer. The 6-8 schools each have their own

encore teachers and are able to offer more courses. The most notable difference discovered was about student success. While the 6-8 teachers mentioned some kids may get "lost in the shuffle," the K-8 teachers said they know their students so well they will not allow that to happen. Again, the quantitative data proved to align with the focus groups' perceptions. It showed that due to the size of the schools, interdisciplinary teaming was not an option at the K-8 schools. However, it also showed that the K-8 schools were able to better implement all the other components associated with meeting young adolescents' cognitive needs. Based on the quantitative numbers, it appears that the K-8 schools are better able to meet young adolescents' cognitive needs.

The last data to be analyzed were the student perception surveys. These surveys showed that the students attending the K-8 schools had more positive perceptions of their school experience than the students attending the 6-8 schools. Interestingly, both grade-level configurations' highest and lowest ratings were on the same two questions.

In comparing and triangulating this data, the student perceptions at the K-8 schools being more positive aligned with the K-8 schools being able to better implement the various components in meeting young adolescents' social/emotional and cognitive needs as shown through the teacher and administrator surveys.

After determining that the K-8 grade-level configuration was better able to meet young adolescents' developmental needs, the researcher analyzed the academic achievement data to see if there was a relationship between meeting developmental needs and higher academic achievement. The EOG scores were similar enough that there was no discernable difference in the two separate grade-level configurations and therefore no relationship discovered between meeting developmental needs and academic achievement for this study.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Summary of Results

The purpose of this study was to determine which grade-level configuration is best suited to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. For the purposes of this study, developmental needs are defined as the social/emotional, cognitive, and physical needs of young adolescents. In an attempt to ascertain whether a K-8 or 6-8 grade configuration is better equipped and able to do this, a mixed-methods study was utilized. In this study, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered concurrently and then compared to see if they confirmed or disconfirmed one another. The following research questions were utilized to guide this study.

1. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the social/emotional needs of young adolescents?
2. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the physical needs of young adolescents?
3. What impact does grade-level configuration (K-8/6-8) have on the cognitive needs of young adolescents?
4. What is the relationship between the constructs of developmental needs (social/emotional, physical, cognitive) and academic achievement?

The researcher went to seven schools in northwest North Carolina. Four of these schools served students in a 6-8 setting, and the other three schools served young adolescents in a K-8 setting. Focus groups were conducted to gather the insights of the teachers and principals. The focus groups contained core and encore teachers as well as administration (at two of the sites). The researcher had two digital recording devices and used 12 questions (found in Appendix D) to guide the discussion. Each focus group

lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Additionally, surveys were provided through Survey Monkey, an online survey creation tool, for the principals and teachers which assessed the opportunities afforded to their students and the disposition of the teachers on how important and well implemented these components were in their school setting. Once the researcher gathered all the data, it was sorted by grade configuration, coded by themes, and analyzed to determine which grade-level configuration was better in meeting the social/emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of young adolescents. Next, the student perception data were analyzed by grade configuration to determine if meeting young adolescents' needs resulted in higher student perceptions.

The findings revealed opportunities that meet young adolescents' social and emotional needs were valued and implemented more in a K-8 setting. Additionally, opportunities that meet young adolescents' cognitive needs were also valued and implemented more in a K-8 setting. There was no discernable difference found in the opportunities afforded to young adolescents regarding their physical needs. Once the researcher found these results, the student perception surveys were analyzed. Upon analysis, the researcher found the students in a K-8 setting had a higher overall positive perception regarding their school experience. This connected with the teacher survey results that showed the K-8 schools also had higher rates of implementation of components related to their social/emotional and cognitive needs.

To answer the last research question inquiring as to the relationship in meeting developmental needs and higher academic achievement, there was no relationship found. The data confirmed that the academic achievement in the sampling used was similar in both the K-8 and 6-8 grade-level configurations; so while the K-8 schools are better able

to meet developmental needs, they are not outperforming the 6-8 schools on high-stakes testing.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1. The findings for Research Question 1 revealed that the K-8 schools are better able to meet the social and emotional needs of young adolescents. Upon reflection of these findings, it is essential to look at what underlying reasons are allowing the K-8 schools to be more responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents. One argument is that it is the relationships and community that are more naturally created in a smaller setting. According to the literature, Midgley and Edelin (1998) made the case for a K-8 model by claiming that elementary schools have a greater focus on personal aspects of schooling. This is further indicated by Connolly et al.'s (2002) statement that "K-8 schools quickly become communities rather than institutions" (p. 28). This idea was mentioned multiple times throughout the focus groups from both the K-8 and 6-8 teachers. Arguably, this sense of community is what allows these students to feel comfortable and safe enough to be successful. Again, the literature supports this theory as well. Anderman (2002) showed that students who attended K-8 or K-12 schools in the middle grades reported a slightly greater sense of belonging as compared to students in middle schools and argued that these feelings, in turn, are positively related to optimism and GPA and negatively related to depression, social rejection, and school problems.

While Advisory is ideally offered to provide a sense of community in a large 6-8 school which would meet the developmental needs of young adolescents, many of the schools that are offering Advisory are not utilizing that time as it was originally envisioned in the middle school concept. Erb (2006) claimed that "Schools

implementing the middle school concept are succeeding throughout the country; schools that are not – whatever their grade configurations – are not meeting expectations" (p. 4). Erb claimed that many of the large systems converting back to a K-8 configuration "are specifically criticized for failing to successfully implement small communities for learning" (p. 6). His implication is simply that small communities and components such as interdisciplinary teams and Advisory are a vital component of the middle school concept and without them it is not surprising that these districts have not experienced success in their 6-8 middle schools. These large districts are now hoping that by shifting to a K-8 configuration, "that smallness along with fewer transitions will improve student performance" (Erb, 2006, p. 10). Erb went on to explain that while the transition to a smaller, community-oriented school may help some with achievement, they would experience more success by implementing components of the middle school concept. This literature aligns with the findings of this study that the 6-8 schools are not implementing components of the middle school concept as well as the K-8 schools. While Advisory may be offered on the schedule, it is not being utilized in a way that is most beneficial to students.

Research Question 2. The results for Research Question 2 showed that there was not a significant difference in meeting physical needs for a 6-8 school versus a K-8 school. The initial argument for a 6-8 school is that in a setting meant to only facilitate this age group, there will naturally be more opportunities geared specifically to meeting their needs. In this case, it proved true that the 6-8 schools were able to offer more sports programs on site. Connolly et al. (2002) offered "the K-8 grade configuration does not allow for programs to address the particular developmental needs of any specific age group" (p. 29). The implication behind this allegation is that the K-8 model also has to

cater to children in Grades Kindergarten through 5 in addition to serving the middle school students. This does not always allow sufficient resources to meet the unique needs of young adolescents. This also held true in this study in that the K-8 schools had fewer sports offered on site due to a more limited number of participants. However, the results of this study do not entirely support this theory. Though the K-8 schools are spreading their time and money across students from approximate ages 5 to 13, the teacher disposition surveys showed that they are still able to better implement components needed to meet young adolescents' physical needs in fostering health and wellness. Additionally, the K-8 schools were able to provide opportunities for their students to still play sports if they wanted to travel to the nearby 6-8 school. This aligns with research from Blyth et al. (1978) who concluded that the K-8 school structure supported student involvement with their peers and with extracurricular activities, while the junior high school dampened student participation, despite the larger number of extracurricular activities offered. The focus groups highlighted the concern that many students in the 6-8 schools end up being eliminated from school teams due to an excess number of participants. For this reason, more students in a K-8 setting may actually be willing to participate because they do not have the fear of being eliminated. The K-8 teachers in the focus groups mentioned that everyone who wanted to play was able to.

Overall, both grade-level configurations have their advantages and disadvantages. Though the 6-8 schools offer more sports on site, more students are going to be eliminated from the teams. The K-8 schools offer fewer sports on site but do not have to eliminate participants who want to play. The opportunities for health and wellness were similar in both settings. The K-8 school had a higher rate of implementing programs for fostering health and wellness, but the 6-8 schools had slightly more opportunities for

intramurals at school. Given the results, the researcher could not conclude that one grade-level configuration was better able to meet the physical needs of young adolescents than the other.

Research Question 3. The researcher found that the K-8 schools were better able to meet the cognitive needs of young adolescents. In analyzing the reasons behind this, it could also be related to the community. The larger 6-8 schools mentioned that it was difficult to get parents involved as well as ensure that students are not "lost in the shuffle." All three of the smaller K-8 schools prided themselves on their ability to not let students "fall through the cracks" as well as have involved parents and community. While there could be multiple reasons that parents are more involved in a K-8 school, the researcher is theorizing that similar to the students being more comfortable in a setting that has remained consistent for 8 or more years, the parents would also feel the same way. When students transition to a large middle school, the parents are not as likely to keep the communication going as they are unfamiliar with the new teachers. Additionally, the teachers are less likely to make routine contact as they have more students they are responsible for than a K-8 middle grades teacher.

In addition to parent involvement, the teachers are also able to spend more time differentiating for students. Again, related to the size difference, the K-8 middle grades teachers have fewer students they are responsible for and may naturally be able to meet the cognitive needs more efficiently because they are able to know their students better. The idea that the teachers are also able to vertically and horizontally align their curriculums so easily with fewer teachers was apparent in the data. This could be a significant reason that the K-8 schools are better able to meet the students' cognitive needs. In the large 6-8 schools, there were often 10 or more teachers for one grade. It

would be more difficult for them to coordinate and align their curriculums than it would be for the four or fewer teachers at the K-8 schools.

While the 6-8 schools provided more opportunities for students to take encore classes, these opportunities may not offset the advantage of being in a smaller environment. Arguably, the students at the K-8 schools still have their cognitive needs being met even without the advantage of three separate computer classes or foreign language. Additionally, the 6-8 schools were able to offer more advanced courses for their students on site. While this is definitely convenient, the K-8 schools are still meeting the advanced students' needs through online courses.

Overall, the researcher is theorizing that although the 6-8 schools appeared to have the advantage of more opportunities, these opportunities may not offset the advantage of the small school's ability to more personally meet an individual student's needs. This has resulted in the K-8 schools being better able to meet the young adolescents' developmental needs.

Student perception data. This study found that the students in the K-8 setting had more positive perceptions of their school experiences than students in the 6-8 schools. This aligns with the literature in that Weiss and Kipnes (2006) stated that [6-8] middle schools are detrimental to students' self-esteem, especially for girls. Additionally, Astor et al. (2001) also established that sixth graders in middle schools were much more likely than sixth graders in elementary schools to perceive multiple and specific threats in their school environments.

Research Question 4. For the purposes of this study, the researcher could not find a relationship between the constructs of meeting developmental needs and higher academic achievement. Although the hypothesis was that meeting young adolescents'

developmental needs, specifically cognitive needs, would result in higher academic achievement, the testing results of the two different grade-level configurations were too similar to find a relationship. This could be because the sampling of students is too small and all in one county. For example, one explanation could be that regardless of grade configuration, all of the middle grade teachers in the same county are receiving similar training and resources so their teaching approaches are also very similar. If more schools were analyzed, there may be a more discernable difference.

Overall. While the results of this study are associated by grade-level configuration, another consistent variable could also be size. The nature of this phenomenon is that the 6-8 schools are larger and the K-8 schools are smaller; so while the researcher is referring to the school that is better able to meet young adolescents' developmental needs as a K-8, it could just as easily be any small school, regardless of grade-level configuration.

The size of the school carries with it different implications. Not only can students become closer with their peers and teachers in a small school, but the teachers can also work more closely together. At School G, one teacher was referring to her ability to meet her students' needs effectively because it was so easy to walk down the hall and ask the other teachers about the students. She affectionately referred to her colleagues as "walking cumulative folders" and laughed about how easy it was to find out information about her students. The reason this teacher is able to do this is because she works in an environment where there are close relationships not only with the students but also with the other teachers. This environment is possible because of the size of the school building and ease of access to other members of the faculty.

Comparing 2009 to 2015. The researcher utilized McEwin and Greene's (2011)

National Middle School Survey. The results of his study are discussed in Chapter 2. His findings suggested that the "Middle School Concept" components that make middle schools successful are still highly valued but not always well implemented. The schools that were implementing these components with a higher fidelity were having higher student success and often recognized as HSMS. When comparing his results to the findings in this study, it reveals that the K-8 schools are better aligned to the HSMS than the actual middle schools used in this study. The following table displays the 2009 HSMS and the two different grade-level configurations from this study.

Table 31

2009 and 2015 Results Compared

Middle School Concept Component Related to Developmental Needs	Implementation in HSMS (2009)		Implementation in 6-8 (2015)		Implementation in K-8 (2015)	
	HI	I	HI	I	HI	I
Advisory Programs	26	30	33	40	6	25
Interdisciplinary Team Organization	71	17	34	50	19	50
Flexible Scheduling and Grouping	41	42	28	55	44	56
Strong Focus on Basic Subjects	87	13	60	38	88	12
Educators who Value Working with Young Adolescents	77	20	40	56	100	0
Inviting, Supportive, Safe Environment	86	13	35	52	88	12
Teachers and Students Engaged in Active Learning	61	37	47	49	75	25
School Initiated School and Community Partnerships	19	63	17	40	56	38
Curriculum that is Challenging, Integrative, and Exploratory	60	34	41	53	63	37
Multiple Teaching and Learning Approaches	54	38	51	44	75	25
School-wide Efforts to Foster Health, Wellness, and Safety	49	40	35	48	75	25
Teachers with Middle School/Level Teacher Certification/Licensure	31	31	72	24	81	19
Trusting/Respective Relationships Among Admin, Teachers, Parents	70	30	21	60	81	13
Evidence-Based Decision Making	52	41	38	47	75	25
Assessment and Evaluation Programs that Promote Quality Learning	50	45	46	40	81	19

Note. HI- Highly Implemented; I- Implemented.

The table above shows there has not been a substantial change in implementation of middle school components in the last 6 years regardless of grade-level configuration.

However, it should be noted that the K-8 grade-level configuration better aligns with the HSMS than the 6-8 middle schools in this study. Of the 15 middle school components needed to meet young adolescents' developmental needs, the K-8 and HSMS have similar results; but the K-8 schools actually have a higher implementation on 12 of the above components. The components that showed a large discrepancy are shown in the table below.

Table 32

Discrepancies Found in 2009 and 2015 Findings

	HSMS	6-8	K-8
School-Initiated Community Partnerships	82%	57%	94%
Teachers with a Middle Level Licensure	62%	96%	100%
Advisory	56%	73%	31%
Interdisciplinary Team Organization	88%	84%	69%

One of the larger discrepancies is found with the component concerning school initiated community and school partnerships. The HSMS showed an 82% implementation rate, which is lower than the K-8 schools by 12%. It should be noted, however, that both the HSMS and K-8 schools are able to better implement this component than the 6-8 schools used in this study. Another area in which the K-8 schools had a higher implementation rate was concerning teachers with a Middle Level Certification or Licensure. In this particular situation, the 6-8 schools in this study better implemented this component by over 30%. In reflecting on this discrepancy, one reason could be because in the last 6 years, more schools are ensuring they have "Highly

Qualified" teachers and are requiring their middle level educators to have certification in their content area.

There are two components in the table above where the HSMS are able to better implement components over the K-8 schools. They are the same components shared in Chapter 4 where the 6-8 schools were also able to better implement these components. They are Advisory and Interdisciplinary team organization. Surprisingly, the HSMS only has a 56% rate of implementation regarding Advisory. While this is higher than the K-8 schools' 31%, it is lower than the 6-8 schools' 73%. One interpretation of these results could be that to be an HSMS, Advisory is not a necessary component as only half of these schools are implementing it. This would also explain why the K-8 schools have been unable to implement it within their schedules but are still successfully meeting their students' social and emotional needs as proven in this study. The other component where the K-8 schools fell short was with interdisciplinary team organization. The HSMS and 6-8 schools were at 88% and 84%. The K-8 schools were significantly lower at 69%. Again, one interpretation could be that this component is not as necessary as originally thought in creating a successful environment to reach young adolescents' cognitive needs. The K-8 schools in this study were very small and mentioned that they were able to work together well simply because there were so few teachers in the building and their vertical and horizontal alignment meetings could happen with literally a few people and effectively and efficiently not take much time. Arguably, in small schools there is less of a need for interdisciplinary teaming as connections are more readily made for students in a smaller school setting.

Limitations

There were a few limitations involved with this study. First, this study was

limited by the completion rate of the surveys. The table below is a reminder of the return rate of the surveys.

Table 33

Completion Rate of Quantitative Surveys

Survey	Total Number of Possible Participants	Total Number of Responses	Return Rate
Administrator	7	7	100%
Teacher	128	68	53%
Student	2794	1398	50%

Though the return rate was substantial enough to draw conclusions, it did not include all students or teachers; therefore the results cannot be applied to all situations.

Additionally, this study only included one county in North Carolina and was therefore limited by the small size from which the research population came. While including more regions may reflect more accurately the true situation of young adolescents' schooling, the researcher chose to limit the research population to one county in Northwest North Carolina in an effort to complete a more comprehensive study that involved the convergence of both qualitative and quantitative data.

Another limitation involving the participants was the disproportional number of 6-8 students over K-8 students. Although the number of schools was comparable with four 6-8 schools and three K-8 schools, because there are so many more students in the 6-8 setting, they were more heavily represented. The researcher tried to offset this difference by only looking at percentages instead of raw numbers. Also, due to the size difference in the grade-level configurations, many of the results that deemed K-8 more effective in

meeting developmental needs could also be equated with smaller schools being able to better meet the developmental needs of young adolescents.

The definition, or lack of a definition, of the word "physical" was a limitation. When the teachers were asked how they were meeting the students' physical needs, a definition of what physical meant was not utilized. This resulted in a very narrow view of physical to mean sports opportunities and health classes. Had the researcher provided a more broad definition to also include the physical layout of the classrooms, the physical aspects of the curriculum and lessons used, or even how the schedule affected the students' physical needs, there would have been more data to analyze and make a more sound judgment of which grade-level configuration was better able to meet young adolescents' physical needs.

The last limitation is the timeframe in which this research was completed. This study was conducted in a relatively short timeframe of only one semester. In a longer, more longitudinal study, the results may be more reflective of the true nature of the schools. As it is presently, the research was limited by only having participants who were employed in the spring of 2015 complete the surveys.

Recommendations for Future Research

An informative future study would be to study the same grade-level configurations but different sizes. This could confirm or disconfirm the theory stated above that the grade-level configuration may be inconsequential if the difference is really about the size of the environment.

Additionally, a study could also be conducted that has a more equitable number of both K-8 and 6-8 students. This would ensure that the results found in this study are not wrongly influenced by the larger number of 6-8 students surveyed.

Another possibility for future research could be to study a larger sampling size outside of one county. This research was limited to one county in northwest North Carolina. There is a possibility that the findings shown here are not transferrable outside of this particular county.

A similar study where the researcher better defined the word "physical" would be advantageous to this field of study. The data in this body of research was inconclusive on which grade-level configuration was better able to meet young adolescents' physical needs because the definition of physical was very narrow and only included athletic opportunities and health classes. A future study that also included other aspects of physical needs would be beneficial in assessing which grade-level configuration is better able to meet physical needs.

An essential component of young adolescent success is dependent upon the teachers' dispositions. While this study focused on the Middle School Concept components implemented, it did not discuss the teachers' attitudes and motivations for teaching this unique age group. Rather than grade-level configuration, a valuable study where teacher dispositions were analyzed to see if there is a correlation in specific dispositions and higher academic achievement could be beneficial to this body of research about young adolescents.

Multiple conversations about transitions arose while the researcher was conducting focus groups. The argument pertained to the 6-8 students being better able to adjust to a high school setting and thus more likely to graduate. While this study was limited to viewing the young adolescents while they were in middle school, information was not collected on the success of the students once entering high school. A longitudinal study that would follow these students through high school and look at the

graduation rate of students who came from each grade-level configuration could be exceptionally valuable data to add to this field of information. If one grade-level configuration is better able to developmentally prepare their students for success in high school socially, that information should be provided to the schools so adjustments can be made to better help our students succeed long term.

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Appendix A

Administration Survey

This survey is designed to gather logistical information about your school in an effort to measure how effective your school is at meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents within your current grade configuration (whether it's a K-8, 6-8, or 7-8 facility). The responses to this survey are completely anonymous and will only be used for collegial discussion in an effort to establish which grade configuration best meets the developmental needs of young adolescents.

School Information

What county are you an administrator in?

What is the name of your current school?

Please indicate the most accurate description of the community your school serves.

What grade configuration does your school currently utilize?

- ○ K-8
- ○ 6-8
- ○ 7-8
- ○ Other:

What is the current enrollment of your school?

- ○ 1-200
- ○ 201-400
- ○ 401-600
- ○ 601-800
- ○ 801-1000
- ○ Over 1000

What percent of the students at your school qualify for free or reduced lunch?

- ○ None
- ○ 1-10%

- 11-20%
- 21-30%
- 31-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-60%
- 61-70%
- 71-80%
- 81-90%
- 91-100%

Based on the most recent standardized testing data available, what is the percentage of students at your school who scored on or above grade level in mathematics?

- 1-10%
- 11-20%
- 21-30%
- 31-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-60%
- 61-70%
- 71-80%
- 81-90%
- 91-100%

Based on the most recent standardized testing data available, what is the percentage of students at your school who scored on or above grade level in reading?

- 1-10%
- 11-20%
- 21-30%
- 31-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-60%
- 61-70%
- 71-80%

- 81-90%
- 91-100%

Please indicate your estimate of the percentage of core teachers (math, language arts, science, social studies) at your school who have had specific college or university professional preparation to teach at the middle level. If you are an administrator of a K-8 school, please only include the middle school teachers (6-8) in your estimate.

- 1-10%
- 11-20%
- 21-30%
- 31-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-60%
- 61-70%
- 71-80%
- 81-90%
- 91-100%

Curriculum and Instruction

How many minutes per day is Language Arts taught at you school for 6th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Language Arts taught at you school for 7th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught

for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Language Arts taught at you school for 8th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Math taught at you school for 6th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Math taught at you school for 7th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Math taught at you school for 8th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Social Studies taught at you school for 6th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Social Studies taught at you school for 7th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes)

How many minutes per day is Social Studies taught at you school for 8th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Science taught at you school for 6th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Science taught at you school for 7th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

How many minutes per day is Science taught at you school for 8th grade? (If subjects are not taught daily and/or all year, please provide the average number of minutes they would be taught if they were taught daily. For example, if science is taught for one-half of the academic year for 90 minutes per day, the response would be 45 minutes).

Please indicate the extent to which direct instruction is used in your school.

- Rarely or never
- Occasionally
- Regularly

Please indicate the extent to which cooperative learning is used in your school.

- Rarely or never
- Occasionally
- Regularly

Please indicate the extent to which inquiry teaching is used in your school.

- Rarely or never
- Occasionally
- Regularly

Please indicate the extent to which independent study is used in your school.

- Rarely or never

- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Regularly

Please indicate the extent to which online instruction is used in your school.

- ○ Rarely or never
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Regularly

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer art as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer band as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer career education as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer chorus as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer computers as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade

- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer creative writing as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer family and consumer science as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer foreign language as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer general music as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer health as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer industrial arts as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade

- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer journalism as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer life skills as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer orchestra as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer physical education as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer reading as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer sex education as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer speech as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

Please indicate which of the grade levels offer word processing as an elective option.

- ☐ 6th grade
- ☐ 7th grade
- ☐ 8th grade
- ☐ This is not an elective option at this time.

<u>Sports and Advisory Programs</u>

Please indicate the nature of school-sponsored sports programs at your school.

- ○ Interscholastic sports only
- ○ Intramural sports only
- ○ Interscholastic and intramural sports

Does your school have a teacher advisory (advisor-advisee) program?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

If yes, how frequently do advisory groups meet at your school?

- ○ Daily
- ○ Four days per week
- ○ Three days per week
- ○ Two days per week
- ○ One day per week

- Other:

If yes, how many minutes per advisory session do groups meet?

- 1-10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- More than 40 minutes

Grouping, Team Organization, and Scheduling

Please select the one statement below that best describes your school's operating policy regarding instructional grouping.

- Grouping is random (no tracking).
- Ability grouping (tracking) is used at all grade levels in all basic subjects.
- Ability grouping (tracking) is used at all grade levels, but restricted to certain subjects, for example reading.
- Ability grouping (tracking) is used only at certain grade levels, but in all basic subjects, for example eighth grade.
- Ability grouping (tracking) is used at certain grade levels, but restricted to certain subjects, for example seventh grade mathematics.

Is your school organized into interdisciplinary teams?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please indicate how many individual and team common planning periods teachers on teams have.

- None
- 10 per week
- 9 per week
- 8 per week
- 7 per week
- 6 per week

- 5 per week
- 4 per week
- 3 per week
- 2 per week
- 1 per week

Which of the following best describes the type of schedule utilized at your school?

- Daily periods of uniform length
- Daily periods of varying length
- Flexible block schedule
- Self-Contained Classrooms
- Other:

Please provide any comments you have about what grade configuration (K-8, 6-8, 7-8...) you feel best serves young adolescents' developmental needs based on your experience in education. Do you see benefits of one model over another?

Appendix B

Teacher Dispositions Survey

This survey is designed to measure the level of importance as well as implementation of various middle school components within your current grade configuration (whether it's a K-8, 6-8, or 7-8 facility). The responses to this survey are completely anonymous and will only be used for collegial discussion in an effort to establish which grade configuration best meets the developmental needs of young adolescents.

What county do you presently teach in? *Required

What is the name of the school in which you currently teach? *Required

What grade configuration does your school currently utilize? *Required

- ○ K-8
- ○ 6-8
- ○ 7-8
- ○ Other:

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of advisory programs. *Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1	2	3	4
○	○	○	○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of advisory programs. *Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1	2	3	4
○	○	○	○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of interdisciplinary team organization.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1	2	3	4
○	○	○	○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of interdisciplinary team organization.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1	2	3	4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of flexible scheduling and grouping.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of flexible scheduling and grouping.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of a strong focus on basic subjects (L.Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science).*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of a strong focus on basic subjects (L.Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science).*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of educators who value working with young adolescents.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of educators who value working with young adolescents.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○	○	○	○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of an inviting, supportive, safe environment.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1	2	3	4
○	○	○	○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of an inviting, supportive, safe environment.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1	2	3	4
○	○	○	○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of teachers and students engaged in active learning.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1	2	3	4
○	○	○	○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of teachers and students engaged in active learning.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1	2	3	4
○	○	○	○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of school initiated family and community partnerships. *Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1	2	3	4
○	○	○	○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of school initiated family and community partnerships. *Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1	2	3	4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of a curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of a curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of multiple teaching and learning approaches.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of multiple teaching and learning approaches.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of school-wide efforts to foster health, wellness, and safety.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of school-wide efforts to foster health, wellness, and safety.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of teachers with middle school/level teacher certification/licensure.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of employing teachers with middle school/level teacher certification/licensure.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of trusting/respective relationships among administration, teachers, and parents.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of trusting/respective relationships among administration, teachers, and parents.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of evidence-based decision making.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of evidence-based decision making.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of a shared vision of mission and goals.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of a shared vision of mission and goals.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the degree of importance of assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning.*Required
1- very unimportant; 2- unimportant; 3- important; 4- very important

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Please indicate your opinion about the level of implementation of assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning.*Required
1- not implemented; 2- limited implementation; 3- implemented; 4- highly implemented

1 2 3 4

○ ○ ○ ○

Appendix C

Student Survey

This survey is intended to see if you feel like your school is taking care of your needs. Please answer as honestly as possible and know that all answers will remain completely anonymous.
* Required

What school do you currently attend? *

What gender are you? *

- Male
- Female

What grade are you currently in? *

- 6th
- 7th
- 8th

My teachers provide helpful feedback to students about their academic performance. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree

Decisions at my school always focus on what is best for learning. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree

My teachers monitor whether students are learning on a regular basis. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree

My school values students' learning. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree

There are teachers at my school I can go to for help if I need it. *

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

There are other school staff at my school I can go to for help if I need it. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I am confident in my ability to manage my school work. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I feel my school experience is preparing me well for adulthood. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I have enjoyed my school experience so far. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I like the challenges of learning new things at school. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I have a positive attitude toward school. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I feel I have made the most of my school experience so far. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I am proud to be a student at my school. *

	1	2	3	4	5	

Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I feel like I belong to my school. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I enjoy coming to my school. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

I have meaningful relationships with teachers at my school. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

The purpose of this focus group is to gather information that will help us understand which grade-level configuration is best suited to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents.

Whatever you say here will remain confidential. That means that we won't reveal what was said here by individual name, although we will share the information that you give in general.

We will tape this focus group and transcribe the tape. Where needed, fictional names will be substituted for the names mentioned here.

1. What kinds of opportunities or strategies does your school have to meet the social and emotional needs of your young adolescents?
2. What kinds of opportunities or strategies does your school have to meet the cognitive needs of your young adolescents?
3. What kinds of opportunities or strategies does your school have to meet the physical needs of your young adolescents?
4. Do you think there's a connection in meeting young adolescents' developmental needs and academic achievement? Why or why not?
5. What limitations exist in your school that keep you from best serving your young adolescents?
6. If you could work in any grade-level configuration for young adolescents, what would it be? Why?
7. What grade configuration do you think parents prefer and why?
8. Is there anything you want to add about which grade-level configuration young adolescents' should be placed in?
9. What is the best argument you can give for your school's choice of grade configuration?
10. What services are needed for your students that are currently not provided?
11. What training is needed in your school to help your teachers do a better job in meeting student needs?
12. Do you agree that teacher attitude, skills, and understanding the needs of adolescents is as important or perhaps even more important than the grade configuration of a school? Explain.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this focus group. I believe your comments here will add a great deal to the research base in which grade-level configuration is best for young adolescents.

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form (Surveys)

You are being invited to participate in a research study about the role grade-level configuration plays in meeting young adolescents' developmental needs. This study is being conducted by Jessica Hall to fulfill the dissertation component requirement in the completion of a Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at Gardner-Webb University.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because your county has both K-8 and 6-8 schools educating young adolescents.

There are no known risks if you decide to participate in this research study. There are no costs to you for participating in the study. The information you provide will be used in assessing what grade-level configuration is more appropriate in meeting young adolescents' developmental needs. There will be a survey for administrators asking what opportunities are afforded to young adolescents and how often (example- advisory, intramurals, interdisciplinary teaming…), a teacher survey inquiring how much they value and implement specific components associated with meeting developmental needs, and last a student survey that will gauge their level of school connectedness and general perceptions of their school. Each questionnaire will take about 15 minutes to complete. In addition, I will be conducting a focus group to gather the perceptions of the teachers that may not be explicitly stated through the surveys. The information collected may not benefit you directly, but the information learned in this study should provide more general benefits to administrators in looking at what grade-level configuration to house young adolescents in.

The surveys are anonymous. No individual names will be collected (on the surveys or in the focus groups) and the names of the schools will be coded for confidentiality in writing the results and conclusions from the study. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study. Individuals from Gardner-Webb and the Institutional Review Board may inspect these records. Should the data be published, no individual information will be disclosed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. By submitting the survey, you are voluntarily agreeing to participate. Upon conclusion of this research, I will gladly share the results with you either electronically, or in the form of a presentation and/or professional development for your staff.

If you have any questions about the study, or would like to coordinate sharing the results with you, please contact Jessica Hall at halljw@alleghany.k12.nc.us or Dr. Barry Redmond at bredmond@gardner-webb.edu.

The Gardner-Webb University Institutional Review Board has reviewed my request to conduct this project. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights, please contact Dr. Jeff Rogers, Dean of the Gayle Bolt Price School of Graduate Studies and IRB Institutional Administrator at (704) 406-4724 or email at jrogers3@gardner-webb.edu.

Thank you for your consideration and willingness to help promote research that will help determine what is best for our students.

Respectfully,
Jessica Hall

Appendix F

Informed Consent Form (Focus Group Participants)

You are being invited to participate in a focus group about the role grade-level configuration plays in meeting young adolescents' developmental needs. This study is being conducted by Jessica Hall to fulfill the dissertation component requirement in the completion of a Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at Gardner-Webb University.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because your county has both K-8 and 6-8 schools educating young adolescents. In addition, you are an educator that has experience working with this age group.

There are no known risks if you decide to participate in this focus group. The information you provide will be used in assessing what grade-level configuration is most appropriate in meeting young adolescents' developmental needs. This focus group will take approximately an hour. The information collected may not benefit you directly, but the information learned in this study should provide more general benefits to administrators in looking at what grade-level configuration to house young adolescents in.

The focus groups will be recorded to ensure accurate reporting. However, the names of the participants and the schools will be coded for confidentiality in writing the results and conclusions from the study. No one will be able to identify you or your responses, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study. Individuals from Gardner-Webb and the Institutional Review Board may inspect these records. Should the data be published, no individual information will be disclosed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Upon conclusion of this research, I will gladly share the results with you either electronically, or in the form of a presentation and/or professional development for you and/or your staff.

If you have any questions about the study, or would like to coordinate sharing the results with you, please contact Jessica Hall at halljw@alleghany.k12.nc.us or Dr. Barry Redmond at bredmond@gardner-webb.edu.

The Gardner-Webb University Institutional Review Board has reviewed my request to conduct this project. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights, please contact Dr. Jeff Rogers, Dean of the Gayle Bolt Price School of Graduate Studies and IRB Institutional Administrator at (704) 406-4724 or email at jrogers3@gardner-webb.edu.

Thank you for your consideration and willingness to help promote research that will help determine what is best for our students.

Respectfully,
Jessica Hall

___ Yes, I am willing to participate in the focus group.
___ No, I would not like to participate at this time.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Researcher _____ Date _____